



Les Fils de la Charité
Région France

Henri BOURDIEC
1918-2009

“Or from the Island of Arz to the Island of God”

Henri was born on the Island of Arz, in the Gulf of Morbihan, on October 17, 1918. He would say for a laugh: “On that island everyone is a sailor, except those who get seasick. That is how I became a priest.” His father who was captain on a freighter died in 1929 from a heart stroke when arriving at a port in Scotland where he was buried. And it is only fairly recently, in 1999, that Henri went with three Sons to look for his father’s burial place and he found it; it was for him a very important pilgrimage. His mother also died when he was very young and it is his grandmother who brought him up, with his sister and his brother (a future captain in the merchant navy).

At that time the Island of Arz was a very Christian land. Henri entered the Minor Seminary at Ste-Anne d’Auray and the Grand Seminary at Vannes. There he discovers the young workers who work at the Arsenal dry-docks of nearby Lorient, when he goes to the youth center. Later the reading Fr. Godin’s book “France, pays de mission” (France, land of mission) would be something decisive for him.

When the war started in 1939, he was drafted, then in 1940 and 1941 he would be an officer for almost two years in the “Chantiers de Jeunesse” (youth civil service) where he was in charge of 150 twenty year olds. Back at the Seminary, thinking of his future two principles are maturing in him: an attraction for popular apostolate and a wish to lead a team life. He gets in touch with the Sons at the end of 1943. He becomes aware that the vocation includes religious life, which he fears a bit because he sees it as a set of rules that may be hard for him to live; but also a road to greater renouncement to himself. At his first vows in 1946, he writes: “The apostolate to the poor and to the disinherited has always attracted me and helped me in my difficulties.” He was ordained a priest on December 19, 1947.

Henri, the same man, everywhere he went: Kremlin Bicêtre (1948-1958), pastor at Gentilly (1958-1966), at Athis-Mons, then Paray Athis (1966-1979), at Bezons (1979-1994 and finally as a retired priest with the team in La Rochelle from 1994 to 2004.

To have a picture of Henri, witnesses agree in a surprising way: he had something of Breton granite, both solid and frank, sometimes a little rough; when he had something to say to someone he did not hesitate. But he was above all a man able to listen, sensitive and brotherly. It was pleasant to work with him; he liked greeting people at meals. From the start he was a true pastor who cared for the working world and who wanted the Church to be at its service. When Henri was in Bezons, a layman says: “Henri stressed the importance for a Christian of acting and getting involved in his every day life. He would push us toward the others through different organizations or movements, but he also helped us discover life in the parish and the sharing of the Good News for, always according to him, the two could not be separated and were essential.

Another witness: “I was 16 when I knew Henri in Gentilly, through a friend; I came from an atheist family; he greeted me so well and put me in touch with the YCW that I asked him to

prepare me to be baptized. I saw him every week until my Baptism at age 18. Much later Henri came to my mother's civic funeral and as I thanked him, he told me: "Each morning I think of you; for you have been the star of my life". How many persons, young and adults, activists or not, owe him much due to his way of being, of living, of having dialogue with them.

A particular circumstance of his life: the Mission to the Workers. He lived the highest hours of it; first in the southern outskirts of Paris. He even would have wanted to be a worker-priest. It is only when he was 56 that he realized that wish partly. He was then pastor at Paray Vieille Poste, and he went to the Rungis central market. At first he went in the morning to be hired on a daily basis, a poor among the poor. Later on he was hired at the flower market to unload the freight cars. That is when he joined the CGT (General confederation of workers). When he left for Bezons, he kept on working and in order to do that he had to get up at 4 a.m. When he retired from that work he joined the retirees union in Bezons, until leaving for La Rochelle.

La Rochelle: Henri is 76 years old, happy to be back near the sea. He joins the Sons' team but also the team of Charentes-Maritimes. He is always sensitive to the small folks, to injustice in general. On the harbor, he goes to the Sailors Club. He hardly speaks English while most sailors speak that language, but he is there to wash the glasses, keep the place clean, and simply be of some help. He also goes at the harbor where the freighters are. He said: "I pray for all these sailors, far from their families for months; I thank God for what is nice in their lives. Their life is hard, very hard, but there is also much solidarity. And there I pray the Rosary."

When he came to the St- Joseph retirement home, Henri would go each year to visit La Rochelle. He liked to see the neighborhood again, the harbor but above all the people. The last time was in August 2008; the Christian community gave him an ovation at the end of the Mass to underline, a bit ahead of time, his 90th birthday.

These last months were difficult. He knew he had leukemia. The medical exams were hard on him. He went quickly, following a cerebral vascular stroke; he fell in a coma until he left us on Saturday, January 17.

In his last will he writes: "Say a public thank you to all those who have brought me their friendship and their support during my life, as well as to all my brothers of the Institute and to all the priests who have walked the road with me."

Henri has always known to thank people. Now is our turn to thank the Lord for our brother Henri.

For Regional Council of France, *Jacques Robbe fc*

Translated by *Lorenzo Lortie fc*