



**Les Fils de la Charité  
Région France**

## **Pierre Thivollier 1910-2004**

Pierre Thivollier was born on March 6, 1910 to a Christian family Chenille (Western France), the third of four children. After higher education in a catholic boarding school, he went to the Angers seminary and was ordained a priest on June 5, 1935. He was supposed to be appointed math teacher, but because of his longing for missionary apostolate, he got permission to begin his novitiate with the Sons of Charity as early as August. He took his first vows on August, 28, 1936.

He was appointed to Colombes on the outskirts of Paris. His first four years were mostly dedicated to a creative youth apostolate and systematic visits to families in slums.

He was drafted in 1939, taken prisoner in May 1940 but soon led scores of men to freedom through a tunnel unknown to the Germans. Back in Colombes he found a new parish priest, Fr. Michonneau, and a new assistant Fr. Rétif. They then started in wartime France the Paroisse Communauté Missionnaire (Parish a Missionary Community) experiment, a milestone in the French Church history. This cheerful and closely knit pastoral team brushed aside any obstacle to the Gospel: Latin, classes of ceremonies and money. Through carefully prepared and adapted liturgies, they centered the Christian community on Christ, making it fraternal mobilized for direct evangelization and social action in the neighborhood. Pierre Thivollier gave full extent to his creativity, especially as a youth leader and in liturgical and paraliturgical research.

Direct evangelization brought him home, he said, “the absence of any religious knowledge among the masses”. To remedy it, he distributed Fr. Godin’s books<sup>1</sup>. He then realized that, “beside lots of scholarly books and catechisms, very few show a life of Jesus that reads like a novel and attracts the people’s interest he gathered information and set to work writing his book *Le Libérateur*.

After ten years at Petit Colombes, always looking ahead for needs to come, he wanted to propagate the experiment. With Fr. Monnier’s<sup>2</sup> support, he became the brain and heart of the missions ouvrières paroissiales (parish missions in working class areas). From 1947 to 1956, the missions’ trailers would pull up for three months in more than forty French industrial cities at the parish priest’s request and with their collaboration. The mission team would engage in direct evangelization, through weeklies, neighborhood meetings in homes, public meetings in cafés and cinemas, open debates with freethinkers and anticlericals, grand celebration in tune with the local people’s culture, specific social actions face to unjust situations. They also endeavored with motivated priests and laypersons, to lay the foundations of a lasting pastoral work, such as the creation of new YCW (Young Christian Workers) sections. The experiment was stopped in 1956 by a decision of the General Council. Pierre felt lost and sidelined. After a retreat, he even

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Godin is the author of *France, Pays de Mission?* And of many popular books.

<sup>2</sup> The fourth General Superior of the Sons of Charity.

thought for a while of leaving the congregation. But he was not bitter and soon pulled his caravan of trailers to Poissy-Beauregard, a huge new housing development for auto workers, near Paris. With Fr. Ducruet he was the first inhabitant of the place still under construction. He would warmly greet the newcomers and lay the foundation of a Christian community.

At the same time, from 1947 onwards, he set up summer mission camps in dechristianized rural regions; lots of young Christians, priests and seminarians would spend visiting homes, helping in the fields, repairing churches, distributing leaflets inviting people to pilgrimages and celebrations... Campfires and evening gatherings often led to debates... All such actions were based on a strong community life nourished with Bible study and the Eucharist.

From 1960 on, these camps changed and opened up to the beaches and leisure civilization. In the summer of the peak year 1965, 1500 young persons ran 60 mission camps on French, Belgian and Spanish beaches. They first meant to take their holidays on the same beaches, camping sites and dancing halls as other people, but in a way that would bear witness to their faith. Coffee, dances or songs would give rise to talks. Outdoor Masses were celebrated on Sundays. They were nourished by communal prayer, study times, spiritual talks and were open to the people around without any superior or condescending air. Pierre had a gift for communicating his missionary spirit. Many vocations of lay Christians, priests or religious were born there.

The mission camp required much work and a secretarial office. Pierre left Poissy in 1962. Along with Pierre Dupé and Gaby Ducruet, he took charge of a parish on the French Riviera (Cavalaire) and carried on with his pastoral work in the tourism and leisure world. He stayed there for nine years, spending part of his time in Paris with his newborn *Éditions Cheminement* (On the way), for he kept doing a lot of writing. He thought that his first books were outmoded despite their great success. *"I'd like to write lots of brochures on religious subjects for technical minded youths and for adults of the general public, marked by the great advances in science and technology."* This gift for popular writings he had developed with *Le Libérateur* proved incredibly fruitful. He wrote thousands of pages, all of them translated into numerous languages.

The *Éditions Cheminement* also turned out many *tools* for catechetical and youth Evangelization: records, slides, comics, etc. They were created in Poissy-Beauregard and designed by his lifelong friend Michel Rançon. Some special *tools* (e.g. giant banners and posters) were thought for big illiterate crowds deprived of technical means in some mission rural areas.

From 1975 onwards, he edited comic books on the life of Jesus and the history of the People of God (48 albums mixing comics, photos and comments). Over 10 million copies of his famous *Il a vécu parmi nous* (He lived among us) were printed and translated in Russian<sup>3</sup>, Chinese, Arabic, Punjabi, Malagasy and many other languages and dialects. All this publishing and translating made him a globe-trotter.

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<sup>3</sup> A wagonload was smuggled into Soviet Union in complicity with local railwaymen!

His only goal in all that, his so-called *idée-fixe* was “Jesus Christ and his message made understandable to masses ignorant of religion”. His first copyrights were to finance the caravan and beach missions. He then looked for sponsors, cut the prices to make his books affordable, especially in poorer countries. He left copyrights to translators and Catholic or Protestant associations that still distribute his books. His generosity and self-denial, not always shared by some of his designers and collaborators, brought him some trials. But he was above all a man of faith whose only passion was to get Christ known to all.

By 1985, at age 75, he went to the Old *Sons’* Home. He remained methodical, mission minded, partaking in the community’s life, praying, studying, writing, lecturing, traveling and... gardening. He published his memoirs, and his last book meant to be the fruit of his personal searches, hesitations, doubts, for this man of faith was constantly longing for the truth of his only passion: Jesus.

He loved his times, the world and modernity. He always looked ahead, trying to anticipate new needs and was never satisfied with the answers he was given. His overactive imagination, his creativity, his audacity, propped up with his methodical, regular and courageous work, gave fruit to his apostolate. The bedrock of it all was his passion for Christ; he remained attached to Him even in periods of turbulence, and dedicated his strength and life to evangelizing all the humble on all the continents.

He dreaded the ailments of old age. They came very late and worse than expected. But he “*was longing for the day He would come and take me in. May He find me watching with the little flame of my lit lamp, as He said in His parables and as I have been trying to transmit it...*”

He slept into death on Fryday, April 30, 2004, at the age of 94.

Robert JOURFIER, Superior for France.

## **A Soul**

(...) Pierre was a typical missionary. He spent all his life keeping a watchful eye on the nest great challenges of the world and trying to find an answer in the name of Jesus.

He was first parish assistant to Fr. Thomé and Fr. Monnier in Petit Colombes. Monnier and Thivollier were very different because of their past, views and options, but drew on the same source: their admiration for Jesus. This one source united them deeply, far beyond their differences.

But André Monnier was appointed master of novices. And when Pierre came back by 1940 after escaping out of a German prisoner-of-war camp, he found the new parish priest, Georges Michonneau and an assistant, Louis Rétif.

I for one think that Petit Colombes' spectacular success has too often been identified with the person of Fr. Michonneau.

Pierre too was a thinker and a creator... He was the inner engine, unobtrusive but so efficient.

He had a pivotal role in liturgical renewal and enlivening.

He launched the first *Mission Camps*. He invented the name which spread all over the world. During camps with more than 100 young people in rural Massif Central, Pierre helped them to realize the greatness of sharing. France was under German occupation and they were starving in Paris. He said to them: "*The farmers provide us with good food, thanks to crops they kept hidden from the occupying forces and saved for us... at their own risk. This food is their wealth. Ours is our faith in Christ... They share with us, we share with them... This is what Mission Camp means.*"

Same thing with neighborhood meetings, Christmas celebrations in cinemas, open debates, and his own involvement in the Paris liberation... Pierre had the art of giving, admiring and receiving. Humble and poor people did not feel misled, and knew they were being respected.

One can now wonder why Thivollier and Michonneau gradually drifted apart and somehow cut ties.

Indeed they were both much alike and quite different.

Georges Michonneau was and remained the man of one basic intuition: the Missionary Parish. He intelligently repeated and improved the experiment of Grand Colombes and Paris Belleville; he adapted it but kept in line.

Pierre Thivollier was a man perpetually on the watch for needs to come, always trying to find Evangelic answers to new questions.

He tried first to give a written presentation of the message of Jesus that would be accessible to ordinary people of our time. He was worried about all that religious literature, unsuited, boring and full of pious mush. With Fr. Monnier's permission he left Petit Colombes for Notre-Dame de l'Espérance (Central Paris). There with a lighter pastoral charge, he could finish his first book, *Le Libérateur*. A dazzling hit! A best-seller followed by flocks of popular books and booklets.

He then grew aware of the decline of the three-week parish mission in France and launched a new formula in a new spirit: *Missions in Caravans (Trailers)*.

After 12 years since he could not set up a new team for the caravans, Pierre turned to another nascent issue he thought would be fraught with serious consequences for the future: the large new high-rise workers housing developments. He went with Gaby Ducruet to Poissy-Beauregard, the second largest such housing development on the

outskirts of Paris. They visited all the families and started many a pastoral initiative to give birth to a new community fit for this new way of life.

Another issue called his attention: the ever growing holiday and leisure times. He thus created the Holiday Mission Camps which mobilized thousands of young *beach missionaries*. To go deeper into this research, he took charge of a parish in Cavalaire, on the crowded French Riviera.

He then resumed writing and founded and ran for twelve years his *Éditions Cheminements* (a publishing house). He was very prolific. One of his books, an illustrated Gospel with comments (*He Lived among Us*) was translated into more than forty languages and is still being distributed worldwide by both Catholics and Protestants. In India, by February 2000, 10.6 million copies had already been handed out. The radio station that sponsored it would receive an average of 70,000 letters per month concerning the book. As of 1994, 2.2 million copies had been introduced in Russia and China. We dare say that over 20 million copies have reached most parts of the world.

Pierre is the very model of a real missionary. Always looking ahead for the world's new needs and for God's answers. He could talk about South America, Africa and particularly Asia with an amazing competence and open-mindedness, concerning the future. At the age of 90, he still read, thought, came into dialogues and prayed on the world with an incredible lucidity.

After his death, a Son of Charity wrote: *Just being who he was, he bore a living witness to that Son spirituality we take ages to shape up. If we Sons don't have to copy him, we do have to be stimulated today by his inspiration, imagination and creativity.*

Pierre was also a genuine missionary because of the lifelong coherence he maintained between his faith and options. His steps followed the light of his belief in Christ. He kept this coherence in his radiant days as well as in his times on the sidelines... Since his religious life as a Son was deeply rooted in his faithfulness to Jesus, it was not distorted by any meanness on the part of some people... In days of cross and relative loneliness, as in days of great human successes, he just went on, steady and faithful.

In our world, there are lives we find disappointing.

Lives we find interesting.

Lives we find good and beautiful.

Lives that open ways and, in the light of Jesus, give us a boost toward the future. Pierre's is, magnificently.

*Joseph Bouchaud fc*

Translated by *Lorenzo Lortie fc*