



Les Fils de la Charité
Région France

Roger CHABREL **1916-2003**

“The time of my departure is at hand. I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. From now on the crown of righteousness awaits me, which the Lord, the just judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but to all who have longed for his appearance.” (2Tm 4,6-8)

Roger CHABREL was born in Paris on October 2, 1916. He was an only son. His father was director of the Caen Smelting enterprise and his was not a needy family, which does not mean that they did not have problems. Indeed his father had become blind and his mother had to be put in a psychiatric institution during the war and probably because of it.

After having studied at the Rouen minor seminary he studied medicine. He was quite proud of talking about that and also to recall that his choosing the priesthood and religious life had been a truly free choice. He had a passion for football, he was chosen on the national military team. He was a fighter.

He was drafted in 1939 and was then very seriously wounded but saved by one of his fellow soldier who was anticlerical.

After a try at monastic life and some time as teacher of Greek and Latin, he became a priest on May 13, 1944 for the diocese of Rouen. But he wrote: *“I am tied to the Institute of the Sons of Charity since 1940. Up to 1944, I spent all my holidays helping at the “Curé d’Ars” youth center in Kremlin-Bicêtre, then I entered as a young priest in an Institute that was rejuvenating itself with the coming of many young men. We were living a kind of enthusiasm and generosity.”*

As a young priest and postulant he is appointed to St Vincent de Paul parish in Clichy. He went back there after his novitiate and his first vows on October 7, 1946. *“I had plenty of luck in what was being asked of me; it was the Clichy of that time with the shanty town at the Porte de Clichy, the “Landy” youth center, the “red suburbs” and “The Moving God”, title of a play written by Pierre Dupé.”*

In 1952 and 1953 he was sent to live another great adventure about which he liked to talk: the missions with the trailers with Pierre Thivollier’s team. With Grand Quevilly, those were the two most precious periods of his life.

He was appointed pastor of Grand Quevilly at age 36, a sign of trust since it was a new foundation of the Sons of Charity. There, he gave all he had as a young priest and religious. That first Sons team with Jean Serrazin, Olivier Noyer and Raymond Chamoreau left its mark on the neighborhood. The arrival of these priests in work clothes, unloading their truck to move into the rectory and having lunch on the spot with a can of sardines set the tone.

Roger had matured his vocation for the working world, first in his family with the Smelting furnaces of Caen, having an interest for those workers of which his father was the boss. By a strange irony of fate, in

Grand Quevilly he had to confront the director of the Rouen Smelting company. A paternalistic company owned a neighborhood of houses for its workers, its school and a chapel in the sanctuary of which was an armchair reserved for the director. An incident about that symbolic armchair has made of Roger, in the view of all, *“the priest who told the count he was a s...”* Beyond that anecdote, Roger was very clearly close to that working population of Grand Quevilly that Christ had entrusted to him to be evangelized.

After eleven years, in 1964, he came back to Clichy La Garenne as pastor. As in Quevilly he initiated a very opened pastoral approach: a living parish where many laypersons had their place and had responsibilities, with many dynamic apostolic movements in what was the Missionary Sector of La Boucle (ACO, ACI, ACG¹, charity movements); a pastoral ministry focused on the young people (catechesis, Children’s Catholic Action and YCW, not forgetting the boy scouts movement to which he was faithful all his life. A sign of his perceptiveness is that he has favored little by little the unity of the two parishes, St-Vincent de Paul and Notre-Dame Auxiliatrice and also that the teams work together.

Elected by the 1962 Chapter he was assistant to the General Superior Joseph Bouchaud from 1962 to 1971. *“He was the man of perpetual quest for understanding, mutual appreciation between us,”* says Joseph. *“In a Council that had been elected more to represent tendencies than to constitute a genuine cohesion, his role was very important. First of all he defended the present and the future of our congregation more than the development of supremacy of this or that option. He never condemned, but sought unity.”*

This quality, of being a man of unity, and not a man of an ideology, served him during the years following 1968 when he accepted to leave Clichy at a moment’s notice to go to Belleville. Belleville was then one of the places boiling with protests in the Church. The pastor and many vicars had decided to leave the priesthood and religious life. The Christian community was perturbed. It was not enviable to arrive there as pastor. He did it with much courage. And also with a bit of naïve pride. He liked responsibilities, challenges and the difficult situations.

André Rebré who was the General Superior at the time says: *“At the time, and still today, I admired the simplicity of his ‘yes’”* One of his past vicars says: *“He had the character of a winner; it is an ambiguous quality, which in him was transformed by his faith and his love for God and the others.”*

In fact if he faced these different circumstances, if he managed with a pastoral intelligence these difficult moments, if he appeased the parish and gave new life to the ministry it is because of his spiritual and intellectual qualities.

He did more than always read, he worked intellectually endlessly and until his last days. That showed in the quality of his homilies. Besides one of his demands was to have in the retirement home material conditions for that intellectual work.

He was also a man of prayer. He wrote during his novitiate: *“to thank God who has called me to the most beautiful vocation, the most resembling that of his Divine Son, who never separated contemplation from action... The union of these two forms of life that complete and help one another, must make our hearts enthusiastic and make a joyful thanks rise out from them.”*

That is indeed the testimony he gave us. A man of action who was suffering as he saw the responsibilities escape him more and more, who did not see possible, at 86, not having a pastoral ministry anymore. And at

¹ ACO is Workers Catholic Action

ACI is a Catholic Action movement for teachers, nurses, accountants, etc.

ACG is General Catholic Action

the same time a man of contemplation, lover of Jesus Christ, who little by little since a few years, and not without a virile resistance, let himself, be dispossessed in faith and abandonment. *“You know I understand you and what you tell me is what I said to the others when I was a member of the General Council”* he told me when I was looking at the future with him and his going to our retirement house. He was getting ready to make that step. And the acceptance of that last renouncement, infinitely painful for him, had appeased him.

He told me: *“In fact I would like to act as a priest, in a ministry, as long as possible.”* God heard him and has allowed him to die in Colombes where he had arrived in 1983 and spent the last twenty years there. There he went on giving all he had. His qualities of a man of action, of a spiritual man, also of a benevolent and indulgent man, he put them all at the service of the parish and the neighborhood, and also of the teams of Sons that came and went. Dispossessed little by little of some ministries, he remained very caring for each of his brothers, and in doing so went on helping the unity of the team.

It is during a meal with them that the Lord called him on Tuesday, February 18. He had been very tired during the weekend and was getting ready to enter the hospital in the afternoon, not joyful but with humor. The meal was joyful. He could not hope for a better death: in Colombes, at home, with his brothers and after a pastoral weekend.

“I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith”. These words fit him like a glove. May the Lord give him the crown of the just!

For Regional Council of France

Translated by *Lorenzo Lortie fc*