

Death of Father Onesimus Lacouture, S. J.

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, Dec 1951, p. 1, 6

Summary: A loving tribute to Fr. Lacouture. Outlines his priestly assignments but highlights his famous "retreat" that emphasized man's dignity, the doctrine of the cross, and the call to saintliness. Says the retreat gave thousands great joy in the spiritual life. Notes the controversy that stopped the retreat, but also says, "He made all things new." (DDLW #944).

Death of Father Onesimus Lacouture, S.J.

Fr. Onesimus Lacouture, S.J., was born in a little town north of Montreal, St. Ours, on April 13, 1881. He was the nineteenth child of his father, Xavier, who was married twice. His mother, Catherine, was his father's second wife. The first marriage brought forth ten children, the second eleven!

Doesn't that sound like the beginning of the life of a saint? Peter Maurin was one of twenty-three children. These two men who had the most influence on my life (and in a way on the life of the **Catholic Worker**) were both French peasants, of France and French Canada. They both knew the life of the land and the city both were men of the poor.

Fr. Lacouture lived only the first six years of his life in the village of St. Ours. Then the family moved to the mill town of Woonsocket, Rhode Island, where they lived a year and then moved to Ashland, and later to Cochrane, Massachusetts. Onesimus graduated from public high school in 1900 and went to the college of the Assumption near Montreal, and after two years to the novitiate of the Society of Jesus at Sault-aux-Recollets. It is there that he was buried last week, after a requiem mass in the chapel. He died on November 16, the feast of St. Gertrude, and was buried on November 20.

One of our dear friends notified me of his death, and I was able to take a bus to Montreal and attend the funeral. The last time I had seen Fr. Lacouture was at Sudbury, Canada, where I had gone to speak. He was procurator of the college there and we talked all one day of the spiritual life and of the retreats which we had been having since we met Father Pacifique Roy, another Canadian, in 1940, when he had introduced us to the work of Fr. Lacouture.

History

Fr. Lacouture's history briefly is this. After he left the novitiate he studied English at St. Andrew's on the Hudson in Poughkeepsie, New York. Then he was sent back to Canada

for three years of philosophy at the Jesuit Seminary in Montreal. Then according to the Jesuit plan of studies, he interrupted his studies for four years of teaching. For one year of this time, he taught Latin at the novitiate, then he was sent to Alaska to teach the Eskimos. He lived in the wilderness, in hardship and loneliness, and here he made two retreats by himself, out under the sky, in the great woods, reading and praying much as the Jesuit martyrs who were the first missionaries to the Indians did before him. Later he resumed his studies, and took his four years of theology in Montreal. He was ordained on the feast of St. Ignatius, 1916. He was then thirty-five and the first World War had been going on for two years. He volunteered for service as a military chaplain. His duties took him to France and with troop ships to India and on returning was demobilized in 1919. From England he went to Belgium where he made his tertianship, a third year of novitiate which Jesuits make after they are priests. One of his companions during this year was Fr. Raoul Plus, whose books we are all familiar with.

First Retreat

When he returned he became prefect of St. Boniface's College in Manitoba for three years, then he went to Caughnawaga, near Montreal, where he was for four years pastor of that Indian Mission. This is the shrine of Katari Tekakwitha where he began to give his now famous conferences on the spiritual life. They aroused such enthusiasm that his superior put him on the Mission Band, which had its headquarters at the novitiate at Sault-aux-Recollets. The first retreat given to priests began on Father Lacouture's fiftieth birthday in 1931, and the last was in 1939. In those eight years he had given 142 retreats to 6,089 priests.

When his retreat work was stopped he spent some time at Santa Barbara, California, at Loyola University in Los Angeles, at Edmonton College, Alberta, and finally at St. Regis Mission, on the border of Canada and New York, where he died. At the time I saw him, he was serving briefly at the college at Sudbury from which he returned to St. Regis.

Sudden Death

He had been in excellent health when on Thursday night, November 15, he had a sudden stroke. After an hour of consciousness during which time he was anointed and received Extreme Unction, he became unconscious and died the next morning while his superior was offering up the Sacrifice of the Mass. He had been taken to the hospital at Cornwall, Ontario, which was the nearest hospital.

A solemn requiem Mass was sung at St. Regis and Bishop Langlois of Valleyfield sang the *Libera me*. Then the body was brought to Montreal, thirty cars full of Indians driving after the hearse for eight miles.

Fr. Lacouture's relatives from Brockton, Providence and Boston came to the funeral, his own superior, Fr. Lalonde, and some of his former associates. I was the only one who arrived from the States.

“It was a very small funeral, considering how great a man Fr. Lacouture was,” one of his friends said. “Just a few years ago he was famous. Now he is anonymous.”

“Unless the seed fall into the ground and die, itself remaineth alone. But if it die it beareth much fruit.”

The Doctrine

The **Catholic Worker** group first heard of the famous retreat which caused so much controversy in 1940 when our friend, Sister Peter Claver, brought Fr. Pacifique Roy to see us on Mott street. Fr. Roy began immediately giving us **the doctrine**, as he always called it, and it was indeed a glowing and a beautiful thing. Fr. Roy sat down to the breakfast table with us that morning, and began talking of the love of God, how by our baptism we had been made the sons of God and what that entailed for us, what responsibilities it laid upon us. We had to put off the old man and put on the new, we had to die to ourselves and rise with Christ and death was painful, indeed a terrible thing. “It is terrible thing to fall into the hands of a living God!” This salvation of ours was a life and death matter. It had cost our Lord His life on the Cross. We are bought with a great price.

We began to recognize our worth as we heard such talk. We began to recognize our responsibilities. It was the kind of retreat which could be preached to the men on the breadline, to the worker, the scholar, to young and old, the educated and uneducated. It was the good news!

Wept for Joy

Father Roy knew the retreat by heart, since he had made it about ten times. He could repeat conferences word for word, and he did so with a warm and happy earnestness. He liked to tell how people received the retreat, how “they wept for joy.” Many of the young priests who made the retreat under Fr. Lacouture, and in turn gave it to us, used to like to gloat over the difficulties of it. Sometimes I thought they were rubbing it in.

There were four or five conferences a day, of an hour each. Sometimes the too enthusiastic ones ran over the hour. Afterwards there was a fifteen-minutes period of meditation in the chapel before the Blessed Sacrament. Complete silence was maintained for a week. There could be no time for writing letters, reading books. Only the New Testament or the psalms were allowed. If you put yourself in the hands of the retreat master you had to follow directions, as though you were in the care of a physician, and indeed Fr. Lacouture was a physician of souls.

Oakmount

When we first heard of the retreats and began making them they were given at Oakmount, Pa., where Father Farina was chaplain of a small orphanage. The retreats were held during

the summer, every two weeks, and the Sisters, Zelatrice of the Sacred Heart, were only too happy to make up dormitories in the classrooms and feed us delightful Italian meals. We wrote about these retreats in **The Catholic Worker**, and many were the readers of the paper who came to make them. Many a young priest who had made the retreat himself either under Fr. Lacouture or under Father John J. Hugo, sent their friends, parishioners, and sometimes non-Catholics, to hear this good news.

Applied Christianity

The retreats were supposedly for men and women separately, but always there were men who could not get to their own retreat, and women who had to go to the men's retreat, and priests who wanted to get in on it (even Monsignori) so the retreats were mixed, indeed. Agnostic Jews, practicing Protestants, Quakers and Catholics, all made it. Fr. Hugo, Fr. Meenan, Fr. Corcoran, Fr. Farina, these were some of those who gave conferences, that were so alive, so glowing, that we will never forget them. And all of these conferences, followed quite literally a pattern laid down by Fr. Lacouture, a course of teaching which did not vary. Fr. Hugo's **Applied Christianity** (of which we have copies on hand and which we will send to those who request them) were, as he points out, the retreat notes of Fr. Lacouture, perhaps embellished by illustration and allusion to other spiritual writers, corroborating the points made.

The Stuff

What was it that we were so taken with in the retreat? Of course it was stimulating, glowing, alive, challenging. We none of us laymen made it under Fr. Lacouture, but most of the retreat masters we heard were good teachers, though some irritated by mannerisms or by faults of temperament. But it was the stuff! It was the stuff of life, of eternal life.

For one thing, it was what Peter Maurin taught, but he spoke of the life of this world. There was no saying, "what can I do about it? What responsibility is it of mine?" Both men recognized the dignity of the laity, the capacity of the laymen for sacrifice, for sanctity. Both recognized indeed, that without sanctity it was impossible to see God!

For too long, too little had been expected of us. When Christ spoke, he spoke from the Mount to the multitudes. He called on all men to take up their cross and follow Him. When we listened to Fr. Lacouture's retreat, we began to understand the distinction between nature and the supernatural (we understand that grace builds on nature and we saw for the first time man's spiritual capacities raised as he is to be a child of God. We saw the basis of our dignity.

Courage

I could write a great deal about that retreat, and all it brought to us, the new vistas which opened out before us. But I will simply say that it gave us spiritual direction. We were

learning how to die to ourselves, to live in Christ, and all the turmoil of the movement, all the pruning of natural love, all the disappointments were explained by the doctrine of the Cross. The retreat gave us hope and courage, as retreats are supposed to do, and we will be everlastingly grateful for it, grateful to Fr. Laouture, who made the retreat possible for us. We feel that we have been participants in a great spiritual movement which is still going on, though it is perhaps now in shadow. The seed has fallen into the ground and has died. But we know that it will bear great fruit.

Misunderstanding

This Onesimus was like the obedient slave of the New Testament. But his master did not free him. After the retreats were stopped because of increasing misunderstandings and controversies, Fr. Onesimus Lacouture lived in silence and solitude with the Iroquois Indians on a mission only eighty miles from Montreal but hard of access. He offered the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass each day, but he no longer preached or taught. He accepted his situation gaily, with joy, rejoicing in tribulation, feeling that he was following the pattern which has been set through the ages. We can say little about the controversy but we do know that he has suffered at the hands of over zealous friends as well as at the hands of his opponents. We hope and trust that his writings, his lucid and clear and glowing presentation of the spiritual life will see the light of day, and that after his writings are examined they will be given to the public.

I should like to see his on grave stone the words, "He made all things new," because his teaching of the love of God so aroused our love in turn, that a sense of the sacramentality of life was restored for us, and a new vigor and meaning was given to our lives. "He made all things new."

P.S. all of the priests who gave this retreat are stationed in parishes and hard at work teaching and preaching and dispensing the sacraments. Fr. Hugo is at Butler. Pa., Fr. Farina is at Donora, Pa., Fr. Corcoran died of cancer, but all the other young priests who shared in this work are most active in their work for souls. There has been no condemnation of the ideas of the retreat although the retreat itself was stopped. **Applied Christianity** has the Imprimatur of the archdiocese of New York.