

Abbe Pierre, French hero, dies at 94

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 26, 2007 All Things Catholic

I have no sociological data to back this up, but I'm convinced that there's a strong correlation between someone's implied ecclesiology and their overall attitude toward the Catholic church. More often than not, when people complain about "the church" -- no matter what their ideological or theological slant, whether they're inside the church or outside -- what they mean is the hierarchy. Sometimes it's actually just a handful of members of the hierarchy whom they find especially irritating.

This sort of "purple ecclesiology," seeing the church almost exclusively in terms of the bishops, is a prescription for grumpiness.

The happiest Catholics I know, on the other hand, have a much broader concept of "church," whether they're conscious of it or not. For them, "the church" is a vast universe of individuals, movements, parishes, schools, journals, international networks, and all manner of other slices of life, engaged in a dizzying variety of activities, from contemplative prayer to feeding the hungry, to striving to translate the gospel into art, politics, finance, medicine, and other realms of secular culture. For those who see the church this way -- again, whatever their political or theological positions -- the bishops play an important role, but command relatively little of their energy and imagination. For every aspect of "the church" that they find frustrating or disappointing, such Catholics can usually reel off dozens of other things they find encouraging.

As then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger himself observed in 1984, in the long run of history, the best argument for Christianity is not its episcopacy but its artists and its saints. The story of France's famed "Abbé Pierre," a priest and tireless advocate for the homeless who launched the worldwide Emmaus movement, and who died this week at 94, offers a vivid example of the point.

A hero of the French resistance who adopted the pseudonym "Abbé Pierre" during the war, Fr. Henri-Antoine Groues, born in 1912, was the fifth of eight children of a wealthy silk manufacturer from Lyons. He launched what became the Emmaus Movement in 1949. In Emmaus communities, poor and homeless residents refurbish donated furniture and household goods and then sell them in a common shop, sharing the profits. Today, the movement numbers 327 such communities in 39 countries.

Groues became etched in the French national consciousness in 1954, when Paris was struggling with a particularly bitter winter. He went on national radio to appeal for help for the homeless, eloquently insisting, "Empty your attics, Parisians! There may be venerable things in them, but they're less venerable than the lives of babies."

"It's not enough to prevent miserable people from dying in the streets," Groues once said. "They have to be helped so they can live like human beings."

Groues remained active until the very end. Just last year, he spoke to the French parliament from his wheelchair, urging them not to roll back a law on low-income housing.

"Abbé Pierre" regularly topped polls as France's most respected person, and was routinely compared to Mother Teresa of Calcutta. In 1992 he was nominated to the French Legion of Honor, but refused it on the grounds that government policies for the homeless were inadequate. He finally accepted the honor in 2001. Groues was also repeatedly nominated for the Noble Peace Prize.

President Jacques Chirac said this week, "We have lost a great figure, a conscience, an incarnation of goodness." Chirac set aside Jan. 26 as a national day of mourning, including a funeral Mass at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. Pope Benedict XVI sent a telegram of condolence in which he expressed thanks for Abbé Pierre's "action in favor of the poorest, which gave a witness of the charity which comes to us through Christ."

I spoke this week to Selwyn Image, an English businessman who worked in the original Emmaus community in Paris with Abbé Pierre in the 1960s as a young student, and who later was instrumental in bringing the Emmaus movement to Great Britain.

"He was a lively, energetic, charismatic man," Image recalled. "He was directed and dominated by his willpower." Image explained that even in the 1960s, Groues had to be sent for a "rest cure" for three weeks every year, in order to compensate for his long, intense hours of work.

I asked Image about the link between Groues' faith and his social commitment. He said that Abbé Pierre did not wear his faith on his sleeve, but he nevertheless radiated deep holiness. Proof of the point, said Image, who is an Anglican, lies in the fact that after one meeting with Abbé Pierre, his son Nick decided he wanted to become a Catholic. (He was later received into the Catholic church).

Image stressed, however, that Abbé Pierre was not some otherworldly figure, but a shrewd "social entrepreneur." When Image wanted to bring Emmaus to England, he recalled, he brought Abbé Pierre from France to discuss the project. They met at an old barn Image had acquired as a base of operations. The two men sat on a bale of hay in a field, Image said, and Abbé Pierre peppered him with questions about his business plan. A successful expert in international marketing, Image said it was one of the most probing business meetings he'd ever had.

The plan obviously withstood scrutiny, because Abbé Pierre sent the equivalent of 30,000 English pounds to get things off the ground -- with the instruction that once Emmaus was self-sufficient, it should pass the funds along to another community that needed help.

When I asked Image if he could put the spirit of the man in a phrase, he said he didn't need to think about it, because Abbé Pierre had already provided his own synthesis. It came, Image said, in the line he would always append when asked for his autograph: *Et les autres?* meaning, "And the others?"

Though the Emmaus movement is not well known in the United States, the H.O.M.E. center in Orland, Maine -- "Homeworkers Organized for More Employment" -- was inspired by Abbé Pierre's vision.

To be sure, Abbé Pierre was not always everyone's image of a saint.

Scandal swirled in 1996 when he initially defended a friend, Roger Garaudy, a French convert to Islam, who published a book titled *Founding Myths of Israeli Politics* casting doubt on the Holocaust and arguing against the existence of Israel. Groues, who had helped Jews escape the Nazis during World War II, later insisted that he "in no way (intended) to question the horrible reality of the Holocaust," but at one point he took refuge in an

Italian monastery and threatened never to return to France.

Abbé Pierre also made waves in Catholic circles in 2005, when he published a set of reflections acknowledging that he had not always maintained his vow of celibacy, advocating the ordination of both married men and women to the priesthood, and supporting gay unions.

In *Mon Dieu...pourquoi?*, he admitted that his vow of celibacy had not insulated him from sexual temptation. "It happened that every now and then, I fell," he wrote.

"I never had regular relationships, because I never allowed sexual desire to put down roots. I've known the experience of sexual desire and its occasional fulfillment, but this fulfillment was in truth a source of dissatisfaction, because I never felt sincere. ? I've understood that in order to be fully satisfied, sexual desire needs to express itself in a sentimental relationship, tender, trusting. That kind of relationship was denied to me by my choice of life. I would have only made both the woman and myself unhappy, tormented between two irreconcilable options for my life," Groues wrote.

Groues wrote that in his opinion, both married and celibate priests are able to consecrate themselves completely to their vocations, and that priests should therefore have the option to marry. He also supported the ordination of women to the Catholic priesthood, writing that "not a single convincing theological argument" supports the ban on women priests.

Predictably, some Catholics were cheered by the statements, others scandalized. Whatever one's reaction, however, it would be misleading and unfair to judge the totality of Abbé Pierre's life by his positions on church politics. (The pope's laudatory telegram indicates that he grasps this as well).

Instead, Abbé Pierre represents one of the towering examples in the 20th century of faith in action, an icon of what Pope Paul VI meant when he said that in this age, the church will be an effective teacher only to the extent that it is first a witness to the love of Christ.

The fact that Catholicism is still capable of generating such witnesses, despite all its struggles and internal fractures, is a heartening bit of context, one which ought to be factored more routinely into reflections about what's happening in "the church."

More information on Emmaus can be found at www.emmaus-international.org [1].

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