

**Canon Fichaux, witness to the holiness
of Brother Exuperien**

Brother Alain Houry

Charles Fichaux (1869-1944) was an orphan. He was brought up by the Sisters of the Hôtel Dieu in Saint Quentin and arrived in Paris in the autumn of 1886. He found lodgings in Montmartre and work in the Madeleine district as a general dog's-body in a shop selling ties, where he cleaned, polished and delivered packages. A friend of his introduced him to his youth club run by the Brothers in the parish of St Pierre de Montmartre. This is how he first made contact with the St Benedict Joseph Labre Society, an "association for the elite", founded in 1882 by Brother Exuperien, Assistant to the Superior General Brother Irlide. The society had begun with twenty or so young people, all of them workers or employees between the ages of 18 and 25, former students of the Brothers' schools in Paris, and youth leaders in their youth clubs. After a probationary period, he was accepted into the St Labre Society on August 3rd 1890 as its 313th member.

**Contact with the St Labre Society
and the call to the priesthood**

Already in 1887, the young man had attended a day of recollection at Athis Mons, near Orly. His biographer, Abbé Charles Bordet, a close associate of Abbé Georges Guérin, Founder of the Young Christian Workers Movement in France (J.O.C.), describes the transformation which took place in the young man - a transformation which he too had experienced: "Charles discovered in his companions a source of mysterious happiness. None of them was rich. They all lived more or less poorly and had jobs which, humanly speaking, were uninteresting. The life that stretched out before them seemed very ordinary, lacking in intellectual or artistic content. And yet **their hearts were full of profound happiness**. Young people need ambitions or hope to make them overjoyed. These young people were full of joy: little by little they had gone beyond visible beauty, finite love, the glory of this world, to discover the beauty, love and the glory of God. Their lives

were increasingly marked by this joy, for it was forever being renewed in their hearts and overflowing into their friendship. This was the «living water» of which Jesus had once spoken to the Samaritan woman and Nicodemus".

In the St Labre Society, Charles Fichaux discovered **spiritual guidance** in the person of Abbé Paguelle de Follenay. This priest, who had a very high regard for Charles, did not think of suggesting to him the possibility of becoming a priest. Perhaps this was because, at that time, there were no seminaries for late vocations without a secondary education. In 1890, when he was doing his military service near Nancy, the military chaplain in whom he confided, told him one day: «Charles, you must become a priest!» The thought had never really occurred to Charles, but now it was as if a veil had been removed, as if he had always known. And so, at the age of 22 he entered the junior seminary. He was put into the 3rd year class with boys of 13 to 15 years of age and set about learning Latin with great determination if not with total success. At the end of September 1895, he entered the major seminary at Issy les Moulineaux, and on December 23rd 1899 he was ordained. He was more than 30 years old at the time.

"**I am a priest, and all the happiness that I have felt for the last two years I owe to the St Labre Association**", he said, as he presented the annual report of the Association on November 20th 1901 (the Association now had 1,098 members, a sixth of the members belonging to the parish youth clubs run by the Brothers in their schools). "The St Labre Association is nothing less than a school for apostles, **an advanced school of Christian life**: it is the bond that binds together the 6,243 members belonging to the 61 societies (clubs) in Paris and in its suburbs". In 1908, seeing the difficulties experienced by the St Labre Association since the suppression of the Institute in France, he offered his services to the Archbishop of Paris as chaplain of the Association to which he owed so much and which he thought could still bear so much apostolic fruit. As Mgr Amette said to the St Labre Association: "I give you a priest, your own Abbé Fichaux, on condition that one day you give me back **100 little Abbés Fichaux**". Abbé Fichaux remained in this post till his death in 1944, having become part of the history of the St Labre Association. And while the purpose of St Labre continued to be primarily the sanctification of young people living in the world in order to make them true apostles in the midst of their companions, over the years it produced well over "100 little Abbés Fichaux".

"His works praise him"

When Canon Fichaux testified in 1936 at the **diocesan examination of the cause of beatification** of Brother Exuperien (1829-1905), he was able to say: "Since its foundation in 1882, the St Labre Association founded by Brother Exuperien has given the Church of God more than *300 priests and religious*, hundreds of Christian families with numerous children and, at the

present time, *69 junior or senior seminarists* in the various seminaries of the Province of Paris. We know also that the **J.O.C. (Young Christian Workers) in France** was founded by a priest (Georges Guérin), a former member of St Labre, and that **Christian Trade Unions** owe their existence to the initiative of Brother Exuperien. "One can say of him that his works praise him".

"It is to his initiative that we owe the foundation of the Association of St Labre in 1882. His aim was to single out a Christian elite from the mass of young people attending the schools of the Brothers and their youth clubs in Paris. From the outset, during days of recollection and retreats at Chaville and then at Athis Mons, Brother Exuperien sought to promote devotion to the Eucharist and the Most Blessed Virgin among the young people that attended [...] He was the driving force behind all-night adoration by young people at Montmartre. He was the one who started the practice of reciting the rosary on days of recollection, and who called the Brothers' house at Athis "Our Lady of Retreats". He it was who introduced the daily recitation of a decade of the rosary and daily meditation into the "Rules of St Labre". [...] Yes, it can be said that our Dear Brother practised all the virtues mentioned in the Interrogations to a heroic degree, because of the constancy, facility, promptitude and amiability with which he practised them. The life of the Brothers is already very hard and very penitential, and the Servant of God was known among the Brothers for his rare virtue". Charles Fichaux had known Brother Exuperien personally especially during the period 1887-1888, and then less directly after his ordination, when he was involved with the St Labre Association, first part-time, while chaplain at the St Nicholas school at Issy les Moulineaux, and then full-time. He recognised the value of the tree by its fruit.

The Gospel parable of the leaven in the dough

Writing to the Associates of St Labre at the beginning of 1932, he described the guiding principle behind the apostolic work of Brother Exuperien and of the other founders in the following terms: "They understood the theory of **the elite and the masses** so well, that is, the Gospel parable of the good leaven and the dough: in other words, you must love, support, protect, enlighten, try to reach all souls, because they are all redeemed by God's blood; but from this mass, you have to single out, seek, find; encourage, completely train an elite which will give life to this mass, which sometimes is so

inert, so amorphous and so indifferent". It should be noted that thanks to the work of Brother Exuperien at the beginning of the St Labre Association, the elite were not a small and exclusive group, but very soon included one out of every six young people who belonged to the parish clubs run by the Brothers of the Christian Schools in the Paris area. The foundations of the St Labre Association were so solid that Canon Fichaux was able to state in 1939: "Since 1882, Brother Exuperien has been the source of immense good, even if discreet, in our great city of Paris, in its dear suburbs, in the diocese of Versailles, throughout France, throughout the world. How easy it would be to prove this!"

With Brother Exuperien, we must associate "the Brothers whose names are ever on the lips of former St Labre Associates, so deeply are they engraved in their hearts: our good and dear Brother Hiéron, Brothers Superiors Joseph, Allais Charles and Adrien; our Brothers Alban, Idelphus and Almer, who devoted themselves for many long years to ensure that our Association lived a deeply intense life [...] Our Brother Visitors and the Brothers at Athis continue the work begun by dear Brother Exuperien with devotedness that is admired by all the St Labre Associates. For 57 years they have been **the soul** of the Association which the venerated Mgr Odelin liked to call "**the Work of Works**".

With the passing of time, the insight of Brother Exuperien's ideas regarding the apostolate has lost none of its strength. From the outset, he was able to share his ideas with the most competent Brothers and gain the interest of the Brothers running the clubs. In 1907, the Brothers, who were forbidden to teach in France, published a brochure on **Youth Clubs**, indicating what was being done in various parts of France and abroad, and how this could be adapted elsewhere. Nowadays all that is left of these St Labre clubs is an Association of Friends and Former members in Paris. There is no doubt that there is a need at the present time for "**advanced schools of Christian life**" in close touch with the needs of all young people and devoted to their evangelisation. Groups offering Christian training such as this must exist in many places. If their existence were publicised and they were formed into "networks" then perhaps Brother Exuperien's apostolic insight might once again begin to bear fruit. •