

# THE CATHOLIC WORKER

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## Pierre Raphaël, 1930-2018

By BILL GRIFFIN

News of the death of a dear friend brings such darkness that, for a time, it obscures all the light they brought and still bring into this world. Pierre Raphael's example

as a priest and his striking accomplishments in the US and in France, his birthplace, shine with a unique light. This remembrance is just a brief sketch of what I know of my friend and some details from his memoir in French.

Pierre was born in the small town of Mulau in the southwest of France in the Aveyron Department. It is, economically speaking, one of the poorest regions but, in terms of natural beauty, one of the most striking. Pierre was the second of four children. His father worked in the postal service and, while he was anticlerical, had a strong sense of social justice. His mother was devoutly Catholic. Pierre had three sisters. The oldest, Marie France, died at eighteen from meningitis when he was sixteen. Pierre recalls her saying to him, 'You're crying. But, you know, I've got courage.'



Shift Change

Mike Goscinsky

That same year Pierre left school to go to work. He also became an avid hiker in the scouting movement. The high, rocky plateaus and the deep, plunging gorges of the Aveyron gave him experiences of nature filled with "quality silence." His regular contacts with Father Bergougnoux, a noted paleontologist, led him to inquire about the priesthood. This Franciscan told him to be prepared for big surprises in religious life. He, himself, had been sent unexpectedly to the United States at one time.

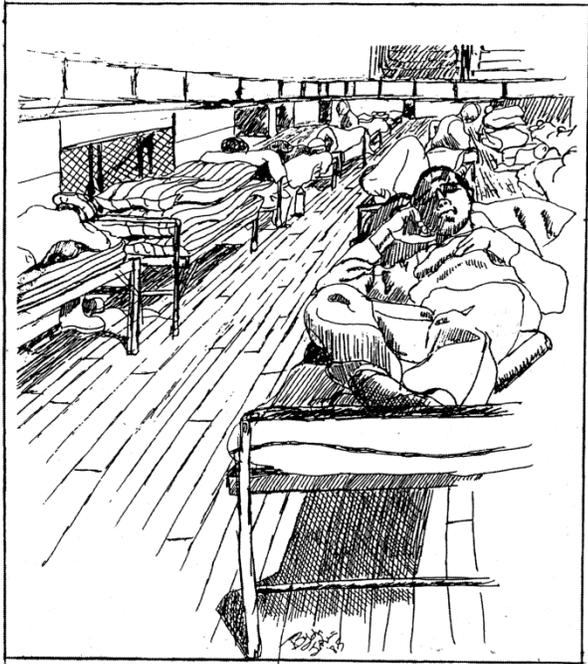
Pierre was drafted and did military service in Morocco during a period of peace. He experienced the awesome Sahara Desert. In 1951 he entered a minor seminary for late vocations. After that he opted to attend the major seminary for La Mission de France, the worker-priest formation established in 1942 by Cardinal Suhard. It was part of the French Catholic Church's response to the modern crisis of dechristianization. The worker-priest movement drew theological inspiration from Jesus' words to His Father: "I do not pray that you should take them out of the world but that you should keep them from evil." (Jn. 17:15) In that period the Dominican scholar, M.D. Chenu, had written a ground-breaking book entitled *Towards a Theology of Labor* which was very influential.

Pierre was ordained a priest on March 19, 1961, the feast of Saint Joseph. He worked and ministered in factories with teams of worker-priests in several industrial cities, laboring as a welder among other jobs. In 1968, a year of great social and political upheaval in France and around the world, Pierre felt the call to join the order of The Little Brothers of the Gospel. This order placed their emphasis on creating small communities, known as Fraternities, in poor neighborhoods in which a significant amount of time was

devoted to silent contemplative prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. The Works of Mercy were also practiced regularly. These activities were all centered around the liturgy.

In 1970 Pierre was unexpectedly sent to join a Fraternity in New York City. The Little Brothers had great esteem for Dorothy Day and they rented a store-front and a small apartment on Fourth Street, just three blocks from Saint Joseph House. Dorothy reciprocated in her admiration for them writing in her column, "The Little Brothers really know how to do nothing." By this Dorothy meant to indicate that the Brothers' disciplined daily prayer was a revolutionary practice in the mad-paced, frenetic place that is New York,

with its obsessive pursuit of money and neglect of the poor and homeless.



Pierre celebrated Mass regularly at the Catholic Worker. He concelebrated the Mass for Dorothy at her death in 1980 along with Dominican priest Geoff Gneuchs. In those early years, there were attempts to establish Fraternities in upstate New York and in Appalachia which did not work out. It was in Jacques Travers' kitchen in the Arthur Sheehan House of Hospitality in Park Slope Brooklyn that Pierre broached the idea of opening a half-way house for ex-prisoners Jacques encouraged and supported him. It was George Anderson, SJ who had first gotten Pierre involved as a chaplain at the huge New York City jail on Rikers Island. George was also a faithful priest-friend of the Catholic Worker who worked as a chaplain there (see George's book, *With Christ in Prison*). At the time George was being transferred by the Jesuits, and found his replacement at Rikers in Pierre.

In the mid-'80s there were over 20 thousand persons incarcerated there, the majority being held because they did not have money for bail, even small amounts. A large women's jail is also located on Rikers. Pierre began working together with a group of Little Sisters of the Gospel. Sisters Simone Ponnet, Rita Claus and Aimée-Marie Henri had worked with Pierre previously in Brooklyn at the Christian Help in Park Slope soup kitchen for the homeless.

This creative and dynamic team of Catholic religious organized spiritual retreats for the prisoners. This was very much appreciated by prisoners and corrections officers alike. The latter saw that the threatening and menacing atmosphere of the jail was somewhat mitigated and their work was made easier.

The cacaphony of slamming cell doors, shouting voices and other loud noises in prison is constant. The scrupulously prepared and organized regular meetings for calm liturgies, Bible study and communal prayer with extended periods of silence were a godsend for prisoners. The retreats created the conditions for needed rest, self-awareness and insight into behavior. For Pierre the idea that human life could rebound in a totally different direction, express itself in a new way, transformed because of God, was strong enough to break the bars of any prison.

It was also their friendships with some remarkable Corrections Officers which allowed Pierre and the Little Sisters to lay the foundations for the residence for released prisoners that became Abraham House. Recidivism, the terrible phenomenon wherein prisoners who are released after serving their sentences but then fall afoul of the legal system again and return to prison, is a notorious and scandalizing tragedy. The

recidivism rate in New York State is 70%. The African-American and Hispanic Corrections Officers with whom Pierre and the Little Sisters worked to establish Abraham House were tired of seeing so many young people of color going through the jail system over and over.

There were innumerable frustrations and disappointments along the way, including encounters with official, uncomprehending bureaucratic racism, yet Pierre and the team he led persevered. Abraham House opened on the 29th of September, 1993 in the poorest section of the Bronx. The needs of former prisoners are many and require an intensely focused personalist approach. Abraham House only takes in twelve persons at a time. Rehabilitation is a profoundly personal process. It cannot take place in an impersonal environment. Through its human-scale, disciplined and prayerful approach Abraham House was able to achieve a recidivism rate close to zero.



Rita Corbin

Pierre, Simone, Rita and Amy anchored and led Abraham House for twenty years. Then there arose administrative differences with the board of directors over requirements for a strictly non-denominational status in order to do more fund-raising. At the same time these four wonderful exponents of the Gospels were experiencing their own significant health challenges. Pierre was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease five years ago. For all these reasons, some very painful, the four of them gradually returned to their communities in France and Belgium.

In 2012 I accompanied Pierre to the annual retreat of his original community, La Mission de France, held in Lyons. The welcome given by his youngest sister, Janine and by his fellow worker-priests and their large lay community was an extraordinary expression of faith. The next year Pierre left the US with the Little Sisters. He entered a nursing home, La Providence, located near Millau and Janine. Regretfully I could only visit him once. We wrote and spoke regularly on the telephone until Pierre was unable to do so. After that, Sister Marie Claire who saw him daily, would tell me so kindly how he was doing and convey my deep affection.

Pierre had a devoted interest in the Book of Job. He saw it as a profound spiritual resource for the prisoners on Rikers Island. That book contains strange redemptive hope in Job's words in chapter 19:25-27. I feel sure Pierre meditated on Job and on his older sister's dying words while he suffered from Parkinson's disease, which is a prolonged calvary.

To have known Pierre and the Little Sisters of the Gospel, Simone, Rita and Aimée was and is a great blessing for many of us at the Catholic Worker as it was and is for their friends at Abraham House, which continues and the wide circle of folks they helped over the years in Brooklyn and the Bronx. Pierre wrote several books, which were translated into English, [Inside Rikers Island](#), and [God Behind Bars: A Prison Chaplain Reflects on the Lord's Prayer](#). For those interested in helping Rikers Island's impoverished prisoners acquire the often very small amounts of money they need to make bail and get released, please contact [brooklynbailfund.org](http://brooklynbailfund.org) +

CorrectionHistory.Org gratefully acknowledges *The Catholic Worker* managing editor Joanne Kennedy and associate editor Bill Griffin, the author of the above article, for granting permission to our website to replicate his remembrance essay. The first two illustrations in this presentation had accompanied the text of the article. The illustration immediately above appeared with a different article on another page of the same issue, but seemed to fit well with this too. --- *The Webmaster*

Links: to [Abraham House history pieces \(1986 – 2004\)](#) to [Inside Rikers Island](#) to [God Behind Bars](#) to: *Memorial Celebration of Fr. Peter's Life* to: [CorrectionHistory.Org home page](http://CorrectionHistory.Org)