A JESUIT SPIRITUAL INSURRECTION: RESISTANCE TO VICHY

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Blind Spot was the title of a 2002 documentary film which was made up of interviews with Hitler’s secretary Traudl Junge. Junge claimed that she had thought that, as Hitler’s secretary, she was at the center of the world and at the heart of what was knowable. Only later did she come to the realization that she had actually lived in a blind spot, a place of ignorance. The interviews left a strong impression on me because they seemed to capture the feelings that so many exhibited after the war that, despite their positions, they had missed what was really going on. Was the Catholic church a sort of blind spot from which to observe the events of that time? Vincent McCormick, the American Jesuit rector of the Gregorian University in Rome, complained in his diary of the blindness of numerous Jesuits in that city; he was stupefied that so many seemed to hope for a Fascist victory in the war. Protected in the Eternal City which was thought to have such superior international communications, these Jesuits were obviously not observers of the bloodlands of Europe.

Fortunately, this chapter will deal with a contrasting phenomenon, the clear-sightedness shared by a group of French Jesuits during that dark time. Its title derives from a remark of Jean-Marie Soutou, a French layman who joined with the Jesuit Pierre Chaillot in the establishment of the group “Amitié Chrétienne” in order to assist victims of the Vichy government and of the German occupation of France. In a conversation Soutou described such activities as a “genuine religious insurrection.” We should do justice to the participation of approximately 50 French Jesuits in this...

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1 Blind Spot: Hitler’s Secretary, a film by André Heller and Othmar Schmiderer (2002).
3 Soutou makes the remark in a conversation with the documentary filmmaker Pierre Sauvage in his *Three Righteous Christians* (2011). The figure of 50 French Jesuits (30 from Lyon Province, 20 from the other provinces) is the estimate given by Bernard Comte in his “Jésuites lyonnais résistants,” in *Les jésuites à Lyon XVIe–XXe siècles*, ed. Étienne Fouilloux and Bernard Hours (ENS Editions: Lyon, 2007), 202. There were approximately 3,000 French Jesuits at the time, 2,000 of whom resided in France and 1,000 in mission territories. Of course, there were many Jesuits who were pro-Vichy and anti-Semitic. See Dominique Avon and Philippe Rocher, *Les jésuites et la société française XIX–XXe siècles* (Editions Privat: Toulouse, 2001).
religious insurrection, their description of it as a “spiritual resistance,” and thus a refusal to reduce their activities to a mere engagement with politics or even a moral resistance.⁴ What was this spiritual resistance? In my view, it embraced at least six features: an intensified self-relation; an immersion in the historical moment; a subversive critique of claims to religious status; a reaching out to other spiritual communities; a direct confrontation with anti-Semitism; and, finally, a commitment to action, especially to the task of saving Jewish life.

First, it entailed for the resister a critical relationship with himself, a fresh self-invention. They were thinkers and actors “without mandate,” as Pierre Chailet put it, and at a time when the church labored under an omnipresent regime of authoritative orders.⁵ In fact, it was their absence of ecclesiastical mandate that sometimes attracted episcopal denunciation, for these Jesuits were not authorized to speak for the church or to publish materials that had not been approved. One bishop voiced his disdain in 1943 for “the anonymous theologians who had circulated without mandate, handbills of opinion. They are usually styled as ‘eminent.’ As if the bishops are not theologians themselves.”⁶ Some of those mandateless theologians argue, however, that it was precisely their religious commitment to obedience that sensitized them to what they felt were divine imperatives and that relativized the customary ecclesiastical as well as civil submissions. The statements from the French bishops regarding the respect owed to the legitimate civil authorities did not distract these thinkers without mandates from the discernment of spirits to which they were committed. As the Jesuit Yves de Montcheuil pointed out, “obedience did not mean turning off one’s personal conscience.”⁷ Henri de Lubac captured their energy: “Fessard, de Montcheuil and Chaillet were not dreamers or visionaries; they were profoundly religious men who breathed

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⁵ J.P. and M.L. Blum, “Le prêtre de demain,” a 1965 conversation with Chaillet. In the Chaillet file in Jesuit Archives, Vanves, France. I wish to express my deep gratitude to the Jesuit archivist, Father Robert Bonfils, for his warm welcome and assistance during a 2010 visit.
⁶ Bishop Martin of Puy cited in *La Croix* (August 1943), as reported in the Office of Strategic Services document “Basis for Accusation of Collaborationism by French Bishops” (27 February 1945). United States National Archives, OSSRG 226, entry 210, box 415, folder 3. I am indebted to Dr. Marian St. Onge for giving me access to this document.