

The Novelist and Social Catholicism: George Fonsegrive's *Le Fils de l'Esprit*

Charles Talar
University of St. Thomas, Houston, Texas, USA

Abstract George Fonsegrive (1852-1917), noteworthy for his work in philosophy and apologetics, also wrote several novels under the pen name of Yves Le Querdec. For the most part they can be classed as realist social novels with a didactic purpose. *Le Fils de l'Esprit* (1905) falls among these. While didactic novels are not generally remembered for their literary merit, the very qualities that consign them to marginal interest attract the interest of the historian. In the details of life and human interaction that novels portray may be communicated the texture of the times and feeling of a period that more analytic treatments convey. As a novelist, Fonsegrive offers perspectives on a French Catholicism that was undergoing significant transformation in its social action.

Keywords Social Catholicism. Roman Catholic Modernism. George Fonsegrive. Religion and literature. France.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 *Lettres d'un curé de campagne* and *Lettres d'un curé de canton*. – 3 Social Catholicism under the Third French Republic. – 4 *Le Fils de l'Esprit*.



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1 Introduction

In the course of setting out 'a variety of Catholic Modernists' in the published form of his Sarum lectures, Alec Vidler devoted a few pages to the fiction of the modernist movement. In the catalogue of authors and titles that are listed, he mentions George Fonsegrive's pseudonymous writings as forming part of the fiction of the movement, with explicit reference to *Le Fils de l'Esprit* (The Son of the Spirit).¹ A philosopher by profession, Fonsegrive published under his own name in the areas of epistemology, philosophical anthropology, and moral philosophy, while reserving the pen name Yves le Querdec for his writings on religion, including his fiction.² He formed part of a Catholic Literary Revival that was occurring between 1870 and 1914 but, unlike nearly all others forming part of that revival, was favorable to the *Ralliement*, to the *abbés démocrates* open to democracy, and to social teaching expressed in *Rerum novarum*.³ Thus his interest in Catholic Liberalism, reflected in his novels, is exceptional. Fonsegrive published in succession *Lettres d'un curé de campagne* (1894) (Letters of a Country Vicar), *Lettres d'un curé de canton* (1895) (Letters of a District Vicar), a two-part novel *Le journal d'un évêque* (1897) (The Journal of a Bishop), and *Le Fils de l'Esprit* (1905).⁴ The journal of his fictional bishop is set in the future and is intended to depict the situation of the Church no longer under the Concordat. (The Separation of Church and State in France actually did occur in 1905, nearly two decades prior to Fonsegrive's fictional chronology). The other three novels are set in the present and can be characterized as realist social novels. While Fonsegrive stated that his two *Lettres* novels were not "to give lessons",⁵ they were clearly intended to inspire readers

1 Vidler, *A Variety of Catholic Modernists*, 153-5.

2 George Fonsegrive (1852-1917) was a man of wide-ranging interests that encompassed literature, philosophy, and science. An appreciation of the extent of his knowledge of these areas may be gleaned from his *De Taine à Péguy. L'Évolution des idées dans la France contemporaine*. He attended a seminary for a time but eventually made his academic career as a philosopher in a succession of *lycées*. In 1896 he assumed the direction of *La Quinzaine* until it ceased publication in 1907, at the time of the condemnation of Modernism. In addition to the entry in the *Dictionnaire d'Histoire et de Géographie ecclésiastiques* (Aubert, "Fonsegrive George"), see Yver, "L'Homme"; Méline, "Le philosophe"; and also Bost, *Une apologie du catholicisme moderne*. The novels are also discussed in Cocula, *George Fonsegrive (1852-1917)*.

3 On the Catholic Literary Revival see Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution*.

4 Before appearing in book form, *Lettres d'un curé de campagne* originally was serialized in *Le Monde*, beginning in January of 1893. *Lettres d'un curé de canton* first appeared in *La Quinzaine*. *Le journal d'un évêque* was published in the *Revue du clergé français*. All of these volumes were translated into Italian. *Lettres d'un curé de campagne* saw an English edition as *Letters of a Country Vicar*.

5 Le Querdec, *Le journal d'un évêque*, 2: xiv. This preface originally appeared in the *Revue du clergé français*, 11, 56-64.

to go and do likewise in the particularities of their own circumstances, and to provide some guidance in accomplishing this. And in this regard, they enjoyed notable success: Richard Griffiths states that these novels “became the bible of the ‘democratic priests’”.⁶ Written later, *Le Fils de l'Esprit* is cast in the same mold as the *Lettres* and comes under the same genre as a *roman à thèse*, or didactic novel. To a degree, *Le Fils de l'Esprit* is also a *roman à clé*. Although Fonsegrive's protagonists were fictional creations and as such not intended to represent actual contemporaries, in the first chapter of *Le Fils de l'Esprit* four figures do appear who are meant to depict well-known persons, each associated with a particular program of action.

Didactic novels generally are not known for their literary merit. The intention to construct the novel in such a way as to get the reader to identify with the position the author wants to advocate acts at cross purposes with literary aspirations. However, the very qualities that consign them to marginal literary interest attract the attention of the historian. In the details of life and human interaction that novels portray may be communicated the texture of the times and the feeling of a period that more analytic treatments do not convey.⁷ Fonsegrive's social novels offer perspectives on a Catholicism in *fin-de-siècle* France that was undergoing significant transformation in its social action. Under the stimuli of Leo XIII's encyclicals, *Rerum novarum* (1891) and *Au milieu des sollicitudes* (1892), social Catholicism in France received papal encouragement and legitimation, as well as an impetus toward greater democratization of its organizational forms. The 1890s also coincided with the eruption of the Americanist controversy in France, while the first decade of the new century saw growing fears over the reformist initiatives that came to be labeled as ‘Modernism’. Intellectual, political, and social issues became intertwined, such that these novels provide insight into the ferment that was affecting the Church in France over those two decades.

While primary focus here will be on *Le Fils de l'Esprit* with its depiction of lay social involvement, some consideration of Fonsegrive's socially activist priest in the earlier novels can provide context for it.

⁶ Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution*, 274.

⁷ Applied to Fonsegrive's novels, it has been said that “the books of Yves Le Quercet will live [...] as precious documents on the currents and tendencies which, in the final years of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth, enliven and nuance the physiognomy of French Catholicism”. The observation is Georges Goyau's, quoted in Aubert, “Fonsegrive George”, col. 812.

2 *Lettres d'un curé de campagne* and *Lettres d'un curé de canton*

The epistolary form of *Lettres d'un curé de campagne* and *Lettres d'un curé de canton* enable Fonsegrive to offer characterizations of people and events, to depict their interactions and mutual perceptions, to describe ideas and projects for their realization – all set forth in a less formal style appropriate to personal correspondence. In short, the letter form serves the didactic purpose of the author, putting his ideas in an accessible format. The bulk of these letters is written by a priest who recounts his experiences, first as a country pastor, then as one assigned to a larger parish with a different set of challenges.

In the rural parish of Saint-Julien the newly appointed pastor reflects upon the inadequacies of his seminary formation. His preparation for the priesthood has been entirely from books. Of the practical concerns of paramount interest to his parishioners, subjects that would facilitate communication with them, he lacks the most elementary knowledge.

One can refuse to speak to the pastor who comes to recall the Easter duty; but one cannot refuse to speak to the pastor who brings medicine for the sick cow or a remedy to soothe a little child's cough.⁸

The necessity of establishing communication with people is foundational to Fonsegrive's understanding of how a revitalization of Catholicism in France might be achieved. In the rural setting in which the priest finds himself oratorical prowess counts for very little; in Fonsegrive's view oratory that does not issue in action, in service to the real needs of people, is sterile. Hence the novel depicts the various ways in which the pastor sets about winning the trust of those entrusted to his care, the practical initiatives he takes or encourages others to engage in to ameliorate their material welfare, without losing sight of their spiritual welfare. His letters present his style of preaching and the rationale for it; his negotiation of local politics fraught with the complications of a Catholic aristocracy resistant to the Republic and the people who regard it as being on the side of the poor against the rich; his successful intervention on behalf of parishioners involved in a lawsuit; his interest in securing improved health care; his encouragement of agricultural experiments and the formation of an agricultural association; his ministry to the youth of the

⁸ Le Querdec, *Lettres d'un curé de campagne*, 16 (Author's transl.); cf. Le Querdec, *Letters of a Country Vicar*, 17.

parish; his reflections of the relations of Church and State. The overall picture is one of an activist priest, one devoted to the spiritual elevation of his parishioners while heeding Leo XIII's admonition "to go out to the people",⁹ to leave the confines of the sacristy to involve himself in a ministry that is social as well as spiritual.

The priest's activities attract the notice of the bishop who, after having inquired into the state of the parish of Saint-Julien, invites its pastor to lecture at the major seminary. The incorporation of the notes for this lecture provides another forum for Fonsegrive's ideas on seminary education and, by extension, his model for a renewed priesthood. The introduction to his lecture provides the rationale for the conduct of his ministry. In it he argues that religion is useful in fostering temporal well-being as well as spiritual salvation:

If this is true, it will suffice in order to attract men to religion to show them its benefits of every nature. [...] In order to do that, [the priest's] action ought not to limit itself to specifically priestly actions. His apostleship should be exercised outside the Church as well as in it. His whole life must preach; he must know how to mingle with the life of all, and live in the same way as his parishioners, so that nothing which interests them will be foreign to him. First, he ought to teach them Jesus Christ and the art of Christian life; but he ought also do his best to help in soothing the miseries of corporal life, and even in teaching the means of acquiring and keeping terrestrial goods.¹⁰

Through a life of service, undertaken out of motivation to serve and not for any ulterior motive such as gaining political influence, the priest – or indeed, any Christian – may gain a personal authority that can influence souls for good.

At the end of the novel the priest receives notice of his assignment to the deanery of Saint-Maximin as pastor. This more urban setting will present a series of new challenges, and provide Fonsegrive with opportunities to present the social teaching of Leo XIII. Amidst the spiritual care that is his primary responsibility, the priest reflects upon three major and interlinked forces shaping the modern milieu: scientific development, the rise of democracy, and the quest for social justice. These forces appear in Fonsegrive's non-fictional writings, where he defends the position that none of them, in themselves, are

⁹ "Writing in 1893 to the Bishop of Coutances, the Holy Father said: 'Advise your priests to give up cloistering themselves within the walls of their churches and presbyteries and to go out to the people, doing all they possibly can for the workers, the poor, and members of the lower classes'" (Dansette, *Religious History of Modern France*, 2: 126).

¹⁰ Le Querdec, *Lettres d'un curé de campagne*, 289 (Author's transl.); cf. Le Querdec, *Letters of a Country Vicar*, 294-5.

opposed to Christianity.¹¹ In the novel, engagement with these forces impels the priest beyond the sacristy in thought, word, and deed. To give but one example, reflection on the causes of poverty leads him to organize a credit bureau to address usurious credit and the cycle of debt it creates.

This sequel to *Lettres d'un curé de campagne* emphasizes a point made in that earlier novel, which will reappear in *Le Fils de l'Esprit*. The curé's reputation as a successful pastor has preceded him, and several characters in *Lettres d'un curé de canton* are anxious that he reveal his 'method'. They are startled and disappointed to hear that he does not have one! By method they apparently have in mind a kind of formula or template that one can simply apply. Fonsegrive's point, in the novel and outside it, is that personal investment in service of others does not admit of any such 'one size fits all' uniformity.¹² Catholicism will succeed with people not because it has fashioned a winning political program, or because it has hit upon a series of strategies that will win people over. It will be influential to the extent that Christians witness their commitment to the gospel, and act in concert on the basis of that committed witness. In one of his *Quinzaine* prefaces Fonsegrive generalizes the point beyond the clergy:

Catholics must win a personal authority, their activity must be socially fruitful, such that it will radiate outward, and this radiance will turn into authority. In whatever career, in whatever profession or situation, the Catholic who wishes to pave the way for the future must acquire an evident competence in his specialty, and place this competence at the service of others without any immediate and visible goal other than service itself. Scholar, lawyer, doctor, he must be as able in his profession as possible; landowner, boss, businessman, he must engage himself in his land, his factory, his commerce.¹³

In a specification that will directly relate to the protagonist of *Le Fils de l'Esprit*, he continues:

¹¹ Fonsegrive, *Regards en arrière*, preface of 1899, 71. Fonsegrive invokes these three forces in a number of these prefaces (1897, 1899, 1900, 1903, 1904). Their relationship to Catholicism is an ongoing concern in the pages of *La Quinzaine*.

¹² There is a sense in which Fonsegrive does engage method in the novel. His protagonist argues that the deductive method followed by theology, while excellent for that discipline, yields poor results when applied to social questions. Rather, using the inductive methods of Le Play, it is necessary to gather the empirical data, seek the causes of the problem, before making appeal to charity and justice. Le Querdec, *Lettres d'un curé de canton*, 240-1.

¹³ Fonsegrive, *Regards en arrière*, 128 (Author's transl.).

As landowner, he must improve himself, instruct himself in methods of cultivation appropriate to the soil of his land, make experiments, have his neighbors profit from these experiments, around him develop agricultural institutions, associations, cooperatives, rural funds, mutualities, be the soul of the well-being of his region. [...] He will not hide his Christianity, he will even witness that it is his belief that inspires him not to work solely for himself, but he will not preach, will leave it to his example to work without imposing his ideas, or getting mixed up in elections or propaganda.¹⁴

Fonsegrive admits that it will take time for prejudices to dissipate, for the landowner to gain the respect of the people. However, if Catholics are to regain a greater measure of influence, political influence not excepted, then this is the way to accomplish that.

While the Abbé de Saint-Julien is Fonsegrive's fictional creation, he is based on real-life counterparts. To understand something of Fonsegrive's motives in creating him, and why French clergy, especially those younger, resonated with the character, it is necessary to retrieve the state of social Catholicism in France at this time.

3 Social Catholicism under the Third French Republic

The social Catholicism that survived under the Second Empire and that survived into the early years of the Third Republic was conservative and grounded in the Counter-Revolution. Its opposition to the republican regime was not simply a product of royalist sympathies. The Revolution had destroyed the ancient corporations without any replacement, fostering an individualistic system. In this right-wing social Catholicism, Count Albert de Mun and Count René La Tour du Pin were prominent. Their aristocratic origins were evident in their approach; for example, they wanted to promote charitable activities by the ruling class for the benefit of the working class, rather than empowering the workers to help themselves. The third notable figure, Léon Harmel, had more of the common touch and was more successful in establishing a rapport with workers. He made his factory at Val-des-Bois a model Christian township, involving the workers in decisions affecting their livelihood. In this he represented more the left-wing tradition of French social Catholicism and found his approach validated by *Rerum novarum*. The aristocratic approach of de Mun and La Tour du Pin did not, however, garner widespread support and by the 1880s was fading away. Likewise, while Harmel developed a working rapport with workers, he was not successful with his own

¹⁴ Fonsegrive, *Regards en arrière*, 129 (Author's transl.).

class of owners in attracting imitators.¹⁵ With *Rerum novarum*, especially when seconded by *Au milieu des sollicitudes*, social Catholicism in France entered a new phase with the *abbés démocrates*.

The collective impact of these two encyclicals was to foster an outlook, particularly among the younger clergy and laity, that oriented them away from hope for a Christian monarchy supported by a fervent aristocracy and toward a Christian democracy whose leaders would emerge from a Christian *élite* drawn from all social classes. Political events at the time gave credence to such hope, as realignments were occurring among the republicans. Circumstances were such that among moderate republicans there was a sense that the time had come to moderate their stance toward the Catholic Church in France. This did not involve any lessening of their commitment to maintaining the laic laws, deemed essential to the maintenance of the Republic, but it did see a willingness to be less stringent in their enforcement. On the conservative side, there were also some who judged it time to compromise. Open advocacy of a restored monarchy guaranteed a continued sojourn in the political wilderness. In the interest of peace, they would recognize the Republic, but not its sectarian spirit or its revolutionary personnel, and would work within the system to change laws that were objectionable. Although the term *Ralliement* has become identified with the policy of Leo XIII, when he sought to change the stance of French Catholics toward the Republic, he was taking advantage of something already begun. From 1893 to 1898 French Catholics dominated the movement.¹⁶

While from 1870 to 1890 the principal social Catholics in France were laymen, in the 1890s priests became prominent. In Christian democracy the papal call for a greater social apostolate on the part of Catholics became intertwined with an acceptance of democracy that democratized the Church's approach to the working class. This apostolate was carried out in the press, through congresses – both of workers and of priests – and through works such as those set forth in the second part of *Rerum novarum*. These works have been instanced in the efforts of Fonsegrive's fictional priest.¹⁷ His novels formed part of the apostolate through the press and enjoyed a large measure of success among segments of the clergy open to the progressive ideas legitimated by the pope. Beyond the practical examples of the mea-

¹⁵ On this earlier phase of social Catholicism under the Third Republic, see Vidler, *A Century of Social Catholicism*, ch. 6; Misner, *Social Catholicism in Europe*, ch. 12; Dan-sette, *Religious History of Modern France*, 2: 112-37.

¹⁶ For accounts of the *Ralliement* by those who were involved in the political events of the day, see Leconte, *Les Ralliés* – written from the republican point of view; Piou, *Le Ralliement* – from the Catholic side. See also Lecanuet, *Les Signes avant-coureurs*; Brugerette, *Le Prêtre français*; McManners, *Church and State in France*, chs 8-9.

¹⁷ See Brugerette, *Le Prêtre français*, 2: 376-410.

asures taken by his fictional priest and the inspiration that might be drawn from those efforts, Fonsegrive's larger theme was Catholicism's capability, through its flexibility and faculty for assimilation, to adapt itself to evolution and progress - to the three major forces shaping modern society. This same theme is central to essays he published around the same time as these novels, collected in *Le Catholicisme et la vie de l'Esprit* (1899).

In the midst of the political and social ferment occurring in French Catholicism in the 1890s, liberal Catholic intellectuals looked beyond France for inspiration. They found it in ideas being advocated by a number of bishops and priests in the United States. In the situation of the Catholic Church in that country, these Americanists found not only a *modus vivendi* for Catholicism in a pluralist society, but a model for the universal church of the future. The writings of prominent Americanists such as Archbishop John Ireland found a receptive audience among social Catholics,¹⁸ especially among those involved in Christian democracy.¹⁹ A Church adapted to modern society would require priests who adapted to modern society. In the American convert priest Isaac Hecker, French liberals thought to find just such a model. Walter Elliott's *Life of Father Hecker* (1891) was translated and adapted for a French readership by Abbé Félix Klein. Published as *Le Père Hecker* (1897), it contained an introduction by Ireland and a preface by Klein. Klein put Hecker forward as the model of priesthood not only for the present, but for the future. Moreover, the future that was invoked was not only that of the Church in the United States, but was clearly that of the Church universal. It may be argued that Fonsegrive had already provided French Catholicism with a model priest, albeit in fictional form. *Lettres d'un curé de campagne* had been published in book form the year prior to the appearance of the French version of the Hecker biography, and *Lettres d'un curé de canton* was being serialized in *La Quinzaine* in 1897.

While these movements or tendencies - the *Ralliement*, Christian democracy, Americanist ideas - had their advocates, each generated adversaries. While the *Ralliement* did succeed in gaining a period of appeasement in the relations between government and Church, it did not bring about the expected electoral success for Catholic candidates. The Opportunist allies of Conservatives were the ones to

18 In 1892 Ireland gave a lecture in Paris, hosted by prominent French Catholics such as Albert de Mun. Under the pseudonym of Jean Lacoste, Fonsegrive wrote of his impressions of Ireland's lecture, calling for priests to go out to the people. Goyau, "Le chroniqueur d'une crise".

19 For accounts of Americanism, including its reception in France, see McAvoy, *The Great Crisis*; Fogarty, *The Vatican and the Americanist Crisis*; also his *The Vatican and the American Hierarchy*; Reher, *Catholic Intellectual Life in America*. The historiography of Americanism is explored in Gleason, "The New Americanism".

actually benefit. While in 1898 Fonsegrive could still hope for some more or less distant success of the *Ralliement*, by the following year he judged it a failed politics.

Through the malice of some, the imprudence of others, through the weakness of all, we have in a few months regressed twenty years.²⁰

By the end of the 1890s those same words could be applied to the decline of the *abbés démocrates*. In their efforts to conform to papal policy they had gone farther than that policy intended. They had replaced the old identification of Church and monarchy with another – that of Church and democracy. In doing so they had gotten too involved in politics. Leo XIII had called for priests to go out to the people, not to hold public meetings, edit papers, and entangle the Church in a new political alliance.²¹ The polemic against Americanism intentionally struck at the Christian democrats and the Catholic republicans.²² Americanism received condemnation with *Testem Benevolentiae* in 1899, making explicit reference to Elliott's biography of Hecker. Through his identification with the *Ralliement*, with social Catholicism, and with Americanism Fonsegrive attracted the ire of their adversaries and was stigmatized in the polemical literature of the day.

4 *Le Fils de l'Esprit*

All of this forms part of the milieu from which *Le Fils de l'Esprit* emerges. The political route to a resurgent Catholicism has been closed. The *abbés démocrates* have been discredited. Initiatives in social Catholicism are passing back into the hands of the laity. The novel's opening scene, judged from the perspective of its main character, Norbert de Péchanval, is to be understood in light of these developments and of Fonsegrive's enduring convictions about the necessity of acquiring moral force, through holiness and virtue, by Catholics in their local settings.

At the time Fonsegrive wrote these novels the question on the minds of engaged Catholics was how to save France. Catholics could agree on the goal: to return France to the practice of the Catholic faith through social action. They differed widely, however, on the means to accomplish it. Assembled in the Salle Humbert de Romans are a number of speakers, each with his program for conducting re-

²⁰ Fonsegrive, *Regards en arrière*, 73.

²¹ Dansette, *Religious History of Modern France*, 2: 135.

²² Fonsegrive, *Regards en arrière*, 41-2.

form. Under the guise of fictional characters, Fonsegrive has represented actual persons, readily recognizable to the contemporary reader: the poet François Coppée; Jacques Piou, president of Action libérale populaire; Lasies, a former member of Parliament; and Marc Sangnier, president of *Le Sillon*. The assembly Fonsegrive describes had actually taken place in July 1903,²³ so in its prologue *Le Fils de l'Esprit* takes the form of a *roman à clé*. The patriotic poet (called Dombrée in the novel) concludes his speech with a kind of invocation addressed to a savior. Next, Tivoux (representing Piou) speaks for the old conservative Catholics and calls for unity among Catholics to counter the antireligious legislation of the Republic through legal action. Then Mabit (Lasies), representing the Bonapartists, recalls the past glories of France and shares his vision (to the notable enthusiasm of the assembled) of a France restored through force of arms directed by a military savior. Finally, Tassier (Sangnier) counters Mabit's appeal to salvation through external force, advocating in its stead the power of truth and love.²⁴

Norbert's reaction to these varied discourses is informed by what he has learned from the Abbé de Saint-Julien. In establishing a personal relationship between the protagonist of *Le Fils de l'Esprit* and the activist priest, Fonsegrive links his novels intertextually as well as thematically. Norbert recalls the counsels of the priest that Christians must become "sons of the Spirit" through a change of hearts and minds, through inner conversion that acts upon others, not from legislation, political alliances, or brute force. Of all the speakers, then, Norbert's convictions are closest to Tassier's. In the novel it emerges that during his legal studies in Paris he was associated with the *Sillon*, which began as a movement of young Catholics determined to dedicate their lives to the social apostolate.²⁵ But even Tassier's words leave him unsatisfied. They were no doubt inspiring, but did not indicate, any more than had the preceding speakers, what had to be done. Norbert comes away from the assembly with renewed conviction that it will not be through oratory, or even congresses or other organizational initiatives that France will be saved. It is not, as his priest mentor rightly saw, through any algorithm, any general "method" that success will be achieved, but in "awakening in souls, with concern for justice and for truth, the need of a higher life, nostalgia for

²³ Fonsegrive makes reference to it in his *Quinzaine* preface of 1903. See Fonsegrive, *Regards en arrière*, 213.

²⁴ Le Querdec, *Le Fils de l'Esprit*, 17-22, 26-7.

²⁵ Le Querdec, *Le Fils de l'Esprit*, 23-5. On the *Sillon* see Caron, *Le Sillon et la démocratie*. As its membership matured, the *Sillon* became increasingly active politically. Its claims for autonomy in its political activity drew increasing criticism from the hierarchy until it received Vatican censure in 1910.

the divine".²⁶ The opening scene serves as a kind of prologue, setting out roads not to be taken as a counterpoint to the novel's main thesis.

With a conception of the apostolate very much in continuity with that of the Abbé de St. Julien, Norbert returns to his family in rural France, confirmed in his resolve to act directly upon souls. Once there, his refusal to become involved in local politics and his determination to devote himself to agriculture causes no little surprise among his own class. In this he is acting out of his conviction that, in order to change the outcome of elections, it is first necessary to change the state of mind of the electors.

In Paris, Norbert had supplemented his legal studies with courses in agriculture. Back on the family homestead he sets about observing the agricultural practices of his small farmers and comparing that with what he had learned at the Agronomic Institute. He tracks yield in various types of ground and gets a sense of what works best in the local circumstances. By immersing himself in the concerns of the farmers, and by working to ameliorate their material circumstances, Norbert will gain a personal authority that he will use to influence consciences.

The importance of the spirit in which the needs of the people are approached is captured in the portrait of Madame de Xandré. Despite her notable charity toward the poor, she is unpopular. The message here is that the aristocratic approach to social action advocated by La Tour du Pin and others is doomed to fail. Charity alone is not enough to conquer hearts, to overcome the divide between landowners on the one side and farmers and villagers on the other.²⁷ Here and at other points in the novel, Fonsegrive emphasizes that true charity is doing good for the good itself, without expecting any recompense, without putting the recipient under any obligation.²⁸

If Norbert surprises members of his class with his unwillingness to stand in local elections, or even to use his influence to sway the votes of his farmers or domestics, his initiatives with the local school scandalize them. Education was a contested prize for Catholics and Republicans, who both saw it as a means of gaining the loyalty of the future citizens of France. If the local pastor was the representative of the Church, the local schoolmaster (or schoolmistress) was the agent of the Republic. In his conviction that the rural curriculum needed to incorporate instruction in agriculture, in order to keep the more intelligent of the rural populace on the land by making farming less onerous and more productive, Norbert crosses a boundary. As a Catholic he would be expected to ally himself with the local pastor in any

²⁶ Le Querdec, *Le Fils de l'Esprit*, 25.

²⁷ Le Querdec, *Le Fils de l'Esprit*, 168-9.

²⁸ Le Querdec, *Le Fils de l'Esprit*, 371-4.

initiatives of social action. To attempt to work cooperatively with laic figures, atheists of questionable reputation, was tantamount to going over to the enemy, deserting the Catholic cause, an act of treason. Once again this is an instance of new times requiring new ways of proceeding. In striking out in this direction Norbert finds reassurance and encouragement in thinking of the example of his priest mentor, the Abbé de Saint-Julien. He needs it, as members of his own class, alienated by his behavior, ostracize him.

Norbert's apostolate is not confined to agricultural experiment and instruction, establishment of a dairy cooperative, and similar pursuits of benefit to the material well-being of the local populace. His discussions with the schoolmistress, Emma Tournier, allow Fonsegrive to present in her a portrait of a disciple of Félix Pécaut, an apostle of a new pedagogy and an areligious morality. To this conception, through Norbert, Fonsegrive is able to oppose another. In the novel it is clear that Norbert strives to be an educator, first by example, then, upon that foundation, by word. This is no less true in matters of faith. Fonsegrive returns to the technique of reproducing correspondence to show Tournier's puzzlement over the combination of sincere believer and democrat, one open to new ideas, that she encounters in Norbert. She compares the moral force of François de Sales' *Introduction à la vie dévote* that he recommended to her with the moral instruction she received in normal school and finds the former to be superior. She confides her difficulties to her former director at the school and finds the reply weak in comparison with what she has received from Norbert.²⁹ The latter reflects the "new apologetic" with its roots in Pascal, also evident in the work of Maurice Blondel and Lucien Laberthonnière.³⁰

Fonsegrive introduces a measure of romantic interest in Norbert's desire to marry Emma, but his family is adamantly opposed and Emma herself does not, after reflection, accept his proposal. The novel does leave open a possible hope for the future.

Earlier in the story, in what one critic considered "one of the best chapters in the novel",³¹ Fonsegrive has Norbert invited to two dinners. At one the political views of conservatives and rallies are expressed, at the other radical republican ideas dominate. When com-

²⁹ Fonsegrive directs his reader to his *Le Catholicisme et la vie de l'esprit* for an expanded treatment of the points raised at this point in the novel.

³⁰ See Kathleen A. Mulhern, *Beyond the Contingent*. In the novel references to Pascal occur: pp. 397, 424, 439. The "new apologetic" emerged out of a conviction that minds formed by modernity had to be prepared to receive the teachings of Catholicism. One had to meet contemporaries on their own ground rather than beginning with a traditional apologetic presented in scholastic guise. This approach is developed in Maurice Blondel's "Letter" on apologetical method which appeared initially in the *Annales de philosophie chrétienne* over 1896.

³¹ Chapter 7 is in view here. Cornilleau, "Le romancier social", 135.

bined with Fonsegrive's ability to communicate the psychological and emotional roots of the Republic among the rank and file, the reader is equipped to appreciate the electoral maneuverings that fill the novel's final chapter. Part of the lack of success on the part of Catholics in politics was their insistence in backing conservative Catholic candidates incapable of winning. In the local elections Norbert successfully persuades the conservative candidate to retire and throw his support behind the moderate Republican candidate, thus assuring the defeat of the radical. This is an expression of Norbert's principle of breaking the ties of Catholics from the politics of all parties, whatever their persuasion. The people are to be reconquered by social action, not by politics. As a social novel, *Le Fils de l'Esprit* is intended to provide a counterpoint to the *politique d'abord* of Action Française.³²

Although for the present-day reader a novel like *Le Fils de l'Esprit* or its predecessors from Fonsegrive's pen impress as "singularly lacking in literary merit" with an "extreme didacticism [that] becomes burdensome",³³ they fared better with contemporaries. After the publication of *Lettres d'un curé de campagne*, whose pseudonymous author was thought to be a country pastor, the pope desired to elevate him to the dignity of a Roman prelate as a mark of his admiration. On the appointed day at the nunciature, 'Yves Le Querdec' turned up in the person of a layman, a professor at a lycée and father of a family - much to the surprise of the nuncio. Pressed to accept some other mark of pontifical favor, Fonsegrive modestly refused, wanting only to be of service to the Church.³⁴ In his analysis of *Le Fils de l'Esprit*, Robert Cornilleau asks, "How many young people of the *Sillon*, of the *cercle d'études*, of the A[ssociation] C[atholique de la] J[eu]nesse F[ranaise], owed to the reading of this book a complete orientation of their life toward serious action, in depth!"³⁵ or at least some contemporaries. As the *Ralliement*, the Christian demo-

32 Action Française was a right-wing, anti-republican movement that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. Strongly nationalist, it called for the restoration of the monarchy in France, and as a specifically political movement claimed anyone who supported its political views rather than its religious ones. Its emphasis on the necessity of a strong hierarchical authority attracted many Catholics, including prominent members of the French clergy.

33 Reardon, "Fiction as Sociology", 91. Reardon also criticizes Fonsegrive's characters as "cardboard figures who speak". "For those who have read Bernanos' *Diary of a Country Priest*, and Martin du Gard's *Jean Barois*, Fonsegrive's fictional works are without passion".

34 Cornilleau, "Le romancier social", 112.

35 Cornilleau, "Le romancier social", 141. The ACJF (Association Catholique de la Jeunesse Française) was founded in 1886 by de Mun with a small circle of young men. The association spread rapidly. The *cercles d'études* were small groups of about a dozen young men who investigated social questions under the guidance of an experienced priest or layman. Originating in the ACJF, they spread to other organizations dedicated to social action. See Caron, "Catholic Social Effort"; Turmann, "The Social Activity".

crats, and the *Sillon* came under attack from *refractaires* Catholics and, latterly, anti-Modernists, Fonsegrive's writings were objects of attack. Charles Maignen in his polemic against a "new Catholicism" and a "new clergy" made it clear that advice on ecclesiastical matters from a layman exceeded Fonsegrive's competence.³⁶ Maignen is remembered for his polemic work against Americanism and it is under that rubric that he exposes and corrects Fonsegrive's errors that were supportive of that movement. Writing shortly before the Vatican condemnation of Modernism in 1907, Emmanuel Barbier likewise challenged the laity's claim to direct ecclesiastical matters, singling out Fonsegrive and Harmel as offenders. In Fonsegrive's case, Barbier acidly remarks that no bishop in France can equal this layman's knowledge of the needs of the French Church. No bishop has traced out so clear and so assured a plan of universal reform, encompassing ecclesiastical discipline, the seminary curriculum, priestly life, the spirit of religious life, theology, the mode of nominating pastors and bishops, methods of Christian education. Barbier takes particular umbrage at Fonsegrive's claims to be interpreting and representing papal policy.³⁷

In his contribution to the volume of the *Cahiers de la nouvelle journée* devoted to Fonsegrive, George Goyau aptly describes him as the "chronicler of a crisis and a renewal". Referring to the novels Fonsegrive wrote as Yves Le Querdec, Goyau predicts,

History will love consulting them, indeed meditating on them, as the living chronicle of a state of mind, of difficulties that it struggled with, of valor that it roused, opposition that it provoked; it will read there, or at least gain an impression, of the fruitful excitement of certain crises.³⁸

³⁶ Maignen, *Nouveau catholicisme*, 70.

³⁷ Barbier, *Le progrès du libéralisme*, 1: 165. While he makes mention of the two novels that center on the Abbé de Saint-Julien, Barbier concentrates his attack on *Journal d'un évêque*, quoting extracts from it, with commentary (see 165-9).

³⁸ Goyau, "Le chroniqueur d'une crise", 145.

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