

THE SOCIAL MOVEMENT OF 1871

Very often, the seventy-two days of the Paris Commune have been reduced to its radicalism, its sometimes virulent anticlericalism, the fires and symbolic destruction of the Vendôme column, the carnage of the last week... For various reasons, the hopes and utopias of the movement and a part of the Parisian people are set aside or minimised. This observation is also valid for most of the books published by the Congregation about our brothers who lost their lives at that time. So in this reflection we will try to listen to the cries of the people and see how they can question us today.



La The Commune was "fertile in initiatives of all kinds" and was "an original democratic experience" (*La Commune - une relecture de 1871*, by Marc César and Laure Godineau). There was a desire to establish another way of managing and organising community, one that was more autonomous, participatory, social. On 26 March, elections were held in the capital. They were won by the extreme left. A Paris Commune Council was created, composed of 85 members who were divided into 10 commissions. The reforms aimed to

allow the people to directly elect their delegates and choose their representatives at various levels as well as allowing the people to revoke them.

Thus, "*the idea of a new political and social organisation of the Republic was already in the air*" ("*Mise au Point historiographique*", Jacques Rougerie). Therefore, the insurrectionary movement was not only due to the consequences of the failure of war or because the new urbanisation had highlighted the social imbalance. The revolution took place in a totally new Paris. The city had been completely redesigned and modernised by Haussmann after the enlargement of Paris in 1860 when new districts were created. Paris doubled its population to more than 2,300,000 inhabitants. Due to the works, the small workers and the poor were displaced from the centre, and rents and the price of the land increased. Most of the great thinkers of this movement lived mainly in the eastern quarters, especially in Belleville. Among them were Republicans, Blanquists and Proudhonians, Freemasons, Jacobins, members of the Association of International Workers and Independent thinkers such as Jules Vallès, who formed part of a minority.

At the heart of the reforms there was a desire for more participation, more freedom, more equality. The aim was to put an end to privileges, monopolies, exploitation, militarism, speculation, the civil service (cf. *Declaration to the French People by the Paris Commune*, 19 April 1871).

The social measures

Companies and workshops were invited to change their way of working and move towards self-management by the workers. Wage levels were reviewed and teachers' salaries were increased. On 28 April, night work by bakery workers was banned (before 5 a.m.).

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There were many social measures concerning the poorest people (moratorium on renting, part restitution of objects that had been deposited in the Mont-de-Piété). The aim was for justice to be free and to guarantee individual freedoms.

The measures also concerned the secularisation of society and education. An Education Commission was set up on 29 March. School became compulsory, free and secular, because it was "the key to political and social progress" (*Paris Bivouac des Révolutions: la Commune de 1871*, Robert Tombs). Some wanted to create technical schools where "the manual worker could write a book" (Robert Tombs). The Commune also wanted to reform the education of girls. "On 12 May, a school of arts and crafts for girls was inaugurated" (Robert Tombs).

It was recommended that this be run on a partnership basis. Reflection groups were set up to enable many to express themselves, to speak out, especially women. Discourse also had a free hand on the barricades, some 900 of which were erected and made of different materials. The barricades were characteristic of Parisian social movements. They made it possible to block the passage of a street and also to create social links, to fraternise, to exchange, to unite neighbours in the same neighbourhood, in the same street.

The role of women and artists

Women got involved in the Commune. They were there, on 18 March, on the hill of Montmartre when Thiers wanted to take back the guns. Most of them provided services as nurses or cooks and in teaching. They replaced the nuns in hospitals and schools, when possible. Among these women, who were pejoratively described as "femelles" or "pétroleuses" by the opponents of the Commune, there were some great figures: the well-known Louise Michel; Elizabeth Dmitrieff, who chaired the *Citizens' Committee* and who, on 11 April along with Nathalie Lemel, founded a *Women's Union*. They obtained more equality with men in education.



Finally, on 13 April, the painter Gustave Courbet, known for his painting "The Origin of the World", created a *Federation of Artists*. The Federation brought together 400 members: painters, including Jean-Baptiste Corot, sculptors, engravers, architects and masters of decorative art. Here too, the aim was to create a new organisation in the world of art that placed the principles of freedom and democracy at the centre and made culture more accessible.

The Commune was a true social, political, economic and cultural laboratory. It would neither have the time nor the funds to make all the reforms it wished to make. But, in many areas, the Commune marked a step forward and was inspiring.

The Commune as a "crossroads"

The English historian, Robert Tombs, a specialist in 19th century France, invites us to "consider the Commune in a different way", as a crossroads: "*This crossroads is the place where several paths, wide or narrow, cross: the boulevard of the Republic, the avenue of Democracy, and also the street of Socialism, the alley of the Association, the passage of Bohemia, the path of Feminism... and so on. From all these directions, one arrives at the crossroads of the Commune: it is neither the beginning nor the end of the journey, except, of course, for the thousands who die there.*"

For personal and community reflection

1. The General Chapters of the Brothers and Sisters (Rome 2018) speak of the social context in which we live today and the challenges that face us.

Brothers: "The world to which we are sent is the world as it is - suffering, beautiful, seeking, hoping". (Rule of Life, 16). In our world we see the beauty of cultural plurality as well as forced migration and xenophobia. We live in a globalised world that is more interconnected thanks to the media and yet there are many people who are lonely and anonymous. There is a thirst for spirituality and belonging as well as individualism. We live in an era of development and opportunities and yet there are economies that exclude and discard people. There is a greater ecological awareness but also unlimited consumption.

Sisters: "In this new context, the sisters of the Congregation, present in different countries and continents, have identified some realities in the places where we live that, although they have different connotations according to the country, are very significant in highlighting the challenges for our Mission.

Poverty in its different forms, the persistent discrimination of women, climate change caused by global warming, growing human migration and the phenomenon of religious unbelief and intolerance challenge us and demand new creative and audacious responses, which in some sense involve us all."

2. The Social context expressed by Pope Francis in his letter of 12 April 2020 to the Popular Movements.

"In these days of great anxiety and hardship, many have used war-like metaphors to refer to the pandemic we are experiencing. If the struggle against COVID-19 is a war, then you are truly an invisible army, fighting in the most dangerous trenches; an army whose only weapons are solidarity, hope, and community spirit, all revitalising at a time when no one can save themselves alone. As I told you in our meetings, to me you are social poets because, from the forgotten peripheries where you live, you create admirable solutions for the most pressing problems afflicting the marginalised.

... I know that you nearly never receive the recognition that you deserve, because you are truly invisible to the system. I think of all the people, especially women, who multiply loaves of bread in soup kitchens: two onions and a package of rice make up a delicious stew for hundreds of children. I think of the sick, I think of the elderly. They never appear in the news ... farmers and their families... I want you to know that our Heavenly Father watches over you, values you, appreciates you, and supports you in your commitment.

I hope that governments understand that technocratic paradigms are not enough to address this crisis or the other great problems of humanity. Now more than ever it is the people, the communities, the peoples who must be at the centre, united in healing, caring and sharing.

Moreover, I urge you to reflect on "life after the pandemic," for while this storm shall pass, its grave consequences are already being felt. You are not helpless. You have the culture, the method, and most of all, the wisdom that are kneaded with the leaven of feeling the suffering of others as your own ... I want all of us to think about the project of integral human development that we long for and that is based on the central role and initiative of the people in all their diversity, as well as on universal access to those *three Ts* that you defend: Trabajo (work), Techo (housing), and Tierra (land and food).

You are the indispensable builders of this change that can no longer be put off. Moreover, when you testify that to change is possible, your voice is authoritative. You have known crises and hardships ... that you manage to transform — with modesty, dignity, commitment, hard work and solidarity — into a promise of life for your families and your communities."

3. What have been your reactions to reading the social context in which the Congregation lived in Paris (France) in 1871 - "the Social Movement"?

4. What challenges did the Congregation experience at that time and what were the consequences that it had to assume?

5. What calls does the social context in which we live today make of us as brothers, sisters and seculars? Do I allow myself to be questioned by the social demands? Do I really hear the cries from the street? Do I see social movement as a crossroads of possibilities all of which require discernment?

ADORATION



Introduction

We bring before the Lord the reality of our world (*please consider and name the reality you want to place in the Heart of God*).

Let us ask Jesus to intercede for today's world before the Father, who looks at it with goodness and mercy and who teaches us ways of peace, hope and solidarity.

Opening song

Gospel: Mt 5:1-12

Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land. Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you (falsely) because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven. Thus they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Reflection

"To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics." (*Gaudium et spes* 4)



Silence

Time to share

Our Father

Blessing

Prayer

We pray with Mary our Mother and companion on the way and with her very words: *Magnificat*.