

Quarterly essays (in English and French) on the theme
"Querying economic orthodoxy"

No. 66 – March 2016

The antidepressant Cardinal

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Paris during the Great Depression

It was 1932. Paris was bogged down in the great depression of that period. Unemployment and short-time working were widespread. Almost half the French unemployed were in what was then called the *département de la Seine*: that is, Paris and its nearby suburbs.¹

However, a certain great Parisian refused to be depressed. This was Jean Verdier, Cardinal Archbishop of Paris. In his day, the archdiocese of Paris was much bigger than it is today; it covered not just the city of Paris but many of the inner suburbs, such as Neuilly-sur-Seine and Orly, today the site of a major airport.

These suburbs, once villages or small towns, had expanded rapidly since the arrival of the railways in the nineteenth century. But church building had not kept pace. According to the Cardinal, *many people cannot go to church because our churches are too few and too far away.*² He spoke in forceful words of the need to help the needy in this great conurbation: *in this time of great misery, many people know not where to look for consolation and hope. Can we be surprised that they turn to mirages and, what is worse, to hatred?*³

Even within Paris, there were too few churches in the outer quarters near the city boundaries. These districts had only recently been built up; today they are showcases for the architecture of the period 1900 - 1930, the last years of *Art Nouveau* and the first of *Art Déco*. But in 1932 there were not enough churches to provide for all the new residents of these outer fringes of the city.

And then there were the regions of the *zone*, as Parisians called the ring of land, 250 metres wide, on the outer side of the former fortifications, dating from the 1840s, that encircled the city. These were demolished shortly after the First World War. No building had been permitted in the zone; so, once the *fortifs* had gone, there was much vacant space available. From the 1920s onwards, this space was gradually built up with small houses and blocks of low-rent flats.

Two birds with one stone

So, why not attack two problems at once? Building new churches would put many unemployed workmen and artists to work, while providing Paris and its hinterland with the new churches it needed. But how to pay for all that? Cardinal Verdier's ambitions were far from modest. With the slogan *To fight unemployment, help your Archbishop build churches*, the archdiocese launched a loan of twenty million francs, repayable in instalments over thirty years, with interest at 5%. Thus was born the organization called *Les Chantiers du Cardinal* (the Cardinal's building sites), which is still active today.

Twenty million francs doesn't seem much to us today, who remember the little pre-euro franc, worth around ten to the pound. But in the early nineteen-thirties, the cost of building a church was, on average, between 1,000 and 1,200 francs per place;⁴ so, with twenty million francs, one could have built twenty or more churches seating 800 people each. Today, such a vast programme could well cost more than 200 million euros. But not all the new churches were to be designed for congregations of 800. Verdier envisaged the construction of sixty churches of varying sizes. The outcome was even better; more than a hundred were built before 1940. The big loan was fully subscribed in a few hours; gifts and monthly collections in the parishes did the rest.

Paying off that loan called for a major financial effort on the part of the parishioners and other donors. The interest alone amounted to a million francs a year to begin with, though this cost decreased over the years, as the capital was repaid in annual instalments. Thus the loan was fully repaid over thirty years. In addition, it was necessary to raise additional capital to complete those hundred churches. All that during a period of great economic difficulties.

According to needs, not to means

Arielle de Sainte Marie and Alberic de Palmaert, authors of a fine little book on the history of the *Chantiers*, explain: for Cardinal Verdier, *what we need to do is clear: we are going to act according to our needs, not according to our means.*⁵ Better still, he had the nerve to act according to grand visions. Despite all the adversities of those times, some truly marvellous churches were built, such as few church designers today would even dream of.

If you visit the church of Saint John Bosco,⁶ built between 1933 and 1937 in an industrial quarter in the east of the city, you will first be surprised by the elegance of its exterior, of dazzling white concrete, with its bell-tower some 170 feet high containing a twenty-eight bell carillon. Concrete doesn't have to be ugly! Inside, you will find a spacious, lofty church well lit by beautiful stained glass windows, decorated with brilliant mosaics on every wall, with many frescoes and statues, all of fine quality. Unseemly extravagance in a time of widespread poverty? Not at all! For the poverty of that period, like that of today, was due largely to unemployment. So, the more money was spent on building churches, the more work was provided, thus diminishing poverty. Mobilise capital, that's the right recipe!

Let's look at another impressive church, the Sacred Heart in Gentilly,⁷ just outside Paris on the south side. This was originally the chapel of the *Cité Universitaire*, a fascinating group of forty residences for foreign students, each built by a different country. Today, however, the church is separated from the *Cité* by the *boulevard périphérique* (ring road) and inconvenient for the students; it has become instead a church for the important Portuguese community in Gentilly and Paris. It is a splendid building in the Byzantine style with rounded arches and a great central dome. The windows, whose predominant colours are deep rich shades of blue, attract your attention, as do the fine paintings by the Mexican artist Angel Zarraga; the monumental sculptured façade, showing Christ in glory surrounded by a hundred biblical and more recent personalities; and the high bell-tower encircled by four huge bronze angels, which seem to keep watch on the traffic of the *périphérique* far below.

A third and last example: the church of the Saint Esprit,⁸ designed by the great architect Paul Tournon, who was inspired by the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. Tournon's dome indeed strikingly resembles its bigger Turkish model, having a diameter of 72 feet as against 101 at Hagia Sophia. Around seventy artists contributed to the decoration of this church. Many huge frescoes recount historic episodes in church history, from Pentecost to the twentieth century. The colour red predominates, this being the liturgical colour of Pentecost, the colour traditionally associated with the Holy Spirit. The church's masterpiece is the immense Pentecost painting created by Maurice Denis in the apse. Here we see a multitude of persons from the Apostles and the Church Fathers to Cardinal Verdier, Paul Tournon, and Maurice Denis himself with all his family.

A message for us in this story?

This story of mid-twentieth century churches, does it have a message for us today? I think so. It tells of a formidable effort of imagination, investment and creation, launched in a period when most people felt depressed and lacking in confidence, just as many people feel at present. In our own times, confidence is too low for adequate investment; capital dozes in bank accounts and Treasury bills and bonds, earning practically no return; many people suffer persistent unemployment; frustrated, discouraged voters turn to eccentric or extremist politics.

So, what is to be done? Should we build beautiful new churches? Perhaps; or, if not, there are plenty of beautiful old churches that badly need restoration. Cardinal Verdier's organization still builds and restores; should it launch a really big new programme?

In the secular world, one of our major present needs is the conservation of energy and the suppression of pollution by emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. We need urgently to invest in better insulation of buildings, in electric transport, in renewable energies. So let us, as the Cardinal wished, act according to our needs! If we can find ways to finance major projects of the kinds just mentioned, we shall indeed be on the way to recovery. Capital is present, waiting to be mobilised. It isn't only workers that are unemployed, it is capital too. Two sides of the same coin. And yet, the urgent need to

invest in clean energies, and in energy saving, is well known. So, why don't we act?

It is argued that renewable energies such as wind power, solar power and marine turbines are often *uncompetitive* with energy derived from oil, gas or coal; that electric vehicles struggle to compete with the good old diesel engine, whose emissions are suspected of causing cancers and neurodegenerative diseases, such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's.⁹ Are we going to ruin our climate, our environment and our health in order to stay competitive?

It is time to look beyond our current obsession with competition. If, to enable our conversion to non-polluting energy, it is necessary to suppress certain forms of competition, then we shall have to accept that *competition is not always good*. Even if that enrages orthodox economists. They see the economy as a jungle in which only the competitive survive. But in today's world it is cooperation that we need for our survival.

¹ Julian Jackson, *The politics of depression in France, 1932 - 1936* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), page 30.

² *La Semaine religieuse* (Paris), 9 April 1932.

³ P. Boisard, *Les Chantiers du Cardinal* (Flammarion, 1946), page 165.

⁴ *Le Christ dans la banlieue* (Paris), mars 1932.

⁵ Arielle de Sainte-Marie and Albéric de Palmaert, *Les Chantiers du Cardinal* (Editions Ouest-France, 2011), page 21.

⁶ 79, rue Alexandre-Dumas, 75020 Paris.

⁷ 111, avenue Paul-Vaillant-Couturier, 94250 Gentilly.

⁸ 186, avenue Daumesnil, 75012 Paris.

⁹ See Marianthi-Anna Kioumourtzoglou et al. (Harvard), *Long-term PM_{2.5} Exposure and Neurological Hospital Admissions in Environmental Health Perspectives*, January 2016.