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In Memoriam

Comrade Bishop

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The death of a bishop is not a usual occasion for the radical left to mark - but [Jacques Gaillot](#) was not a usual bishop.

At the age of 87, Bishop Jacques Gaillot has died. To pay tribute to him, the French Bishops' Conference has just declared: "Over and above certain positions that may have divided people, we remember that he was above all concerned about the poorest and the peripheries."

Let's charitably overlook the term "peripheries". But it is true that on a number of so-called 'social' questions - notably the recognition of divorce, the marriage of priests, the use of condoms to combat the spread of AIDS, the ordination of women and the rights of homosexuals - Bishop Gaillot expressed progressive opinions which were absolutely contrary to the dogmas maintained by the Catholic Church.

His public and even media stances were felt by the clerical establishment as provocations. Until the sanction: in 1995, the Vatican withdrew his position as bishop of Evreux. The clerical imagination being apparently limitless, he was then appointed honorary bishop "in partibus" of the diocese of Partenia. A diocese theoretically located in Mauritania but, in reality, a purely phantom diocese insofar as there are no longer any churches or Catholics there... for centuries! Now a bishop without a diocese, Mgr Gaillot was to make Partenia the symbol of the struggle of the "sans". [1]

In fact, beyond his personal characteristics, Bishop Gaillot's interventions were part of a very specific moment in the history of the Catholic Church where, in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the liberation struggles and social fights had managed to make their way through: the movement to establish worker priests, the "preferential option for the poor" at the origin of liberation theology, the investment of many activists of the Young Christian Workers (YCW) and Catholic Worker Action (CWA) in worker trade unionism (CGT and CFDT) the involvement of Christians in supporting national liberation struggles (Algeria, Vietnam), the political radicalization to the left of "progressive Christians" with, in particular, the creation and development of the United Socialist Party (PSU), etc.

But this very specific moment was also relatively short-lived (on the scale of the history of the Church). Even when sanctioned, Mgr Gaillot remained faithful in his own way to this Church, without denying or even weakening his convictions. But without weighing in, even in the slightest way. For since then the Church has taken an increasingly reactionary course, its latest notable achievement being the official and resolute support of the Catholic hierarchy for the homophobes of the *Manif pour tous*...

But rather than raising (without any real expertise in the matter!) improbable theological debates, activists of the social movement and the radical left can, in order to pay tribute to him, retrace a few episodes in the life of this rather unusual bishop. In fact, this exercise amounts to evoking some of the main events that marked the development of the most diverse social movements during the last decade of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century. For the man who has sometimes been called "the bishop of the homeless" - "homeless" as in undocumented or homeless - has rarely missed an opportunity to put his status and notoriety at the service of the struggles of the most exploited and discriminated against sectors of the population.

A few dates inevitably come to mind, starting with 1989. Under the impetus of the radical left - in this case, the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire - a collective was set up to organise a counter-summit at the beginning of July on the occasion of the official ceremonies commemorating the Bicentenary of the French Revolution. Under the slogan "debt, apartheid, colonies, enough is enough", the counter-summit wants to give back to the excluded the place they

deserve by assuming the heritage of the sans-culottes: a demonstration to denounce the summit of the rich, the debt that crushes the people, apartheid in South Africa and the existence of the last colonies (notably French). Among the initiatives of the counter-summit, there is a big concert at the Place de la Bastille (with the singer Renaud, the Mano Negra, as well as the South African anti-apartheid singer Johnny Clegg) and a demonstration. But also a press conference gathering the main personalities supporting the campaign: Alain Krivine, the writer Gilles Perrault, Catherine Sinet, Jack Ralite (former communist minister), Georges Wolinski (assassinated in January 2015 in the offices of Charlie Hebdo), the cartoonists Loup and Siné, the emblematic leader of the Carnation Revolution Otelo de Carvalho, trade union representatives from the CGT, CFDT and FEN. As well as Mgr Gaillot...

The invasion of Kuwait by the armies of the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein in August 1990 served as a pretext for the constitution of a vast imperialist coalition (35 states) under the aegis of the United States, with the participation of the United Kingdom and France. In January 1991, this coalition led to the "Desert Shield" operation, i.e. the invasion of Iraq. In the autumn of 1990, many initiatives were taken within the French left to oppose the coming war. This was notably the case with a manifesto entitled "Appeal of the 75 against the Gulf War" which demanded "the withdrawal of all French, American and British troops". Among the main signatories of the appeal, we find Mgr Gaillot, alongside Gilles Perrault, René Dumont, the journalist Denis Langlois and the author Thierry Jonquet. The appeal was at the initiative of a large-scale unitary demonstration in January 1991, a few days before the start of the invasion. The slogan most often used - "What bullshit war is" - is a reference to the poem "Barbara" by Jacques Prévert.

In 1994, Mgr Gaillot became involved with the homeless (and the poorly housed) during the occupation of a building on rue du Dragon, in the 6th arrondissement. This occupation, which, by definition, transgressed the generally accepted legality, led to an increased visibility of the issues of poor housing and gave considerable media coverage to the association "Droit au logement" (led in particular by Jean-Claude Amara). At the same time, a new association was created to bring together the struggles of the homeless: "Droits Devant! Among its founders were Professor Albert Jacquard, the singer Jacques Higelin, Léon Schwartzberg and Mgr Gaillot.

In August 1995, Mgr Gaillot "repeated" his activism in favour of peace and disarmament: he embarked on the Rainbow Warrior, a boat chartered by Greenpeace to denounce the French government's decision to resume a campaign of military nuclear testing in the Pacific.

In 1996, the defence of undocumented migrants against the persecution of the government (Alain Juppé) constituted a new field of commitment: with Professor Léon Schwartzberg, Mgr Gaillot organised the "occupation" of the church of Saint-Bernard, in the east of Paris by several hundred African undocumented migrants, in order to draw attention to their situation and demand their regularisation. In reality, this "occupation" had been largely negotiated with the parish priest (and even the archbishopric). It was going well until the government decided to expel them, thus offering to the stunned world this appalling image of a member of the "forces of order" smashing the church door with an axe... Among the personalities who took turns to accompany the undocumented migrants and who immediately found themselves in the streets of the 11th arrondissement to demonstrate, we find once again Alain Krivine, Stéphane Hessel, Léon Schwartzberg, Ariane Mnouchkine and Emmanuelle Béart. And, of course, Jacques Gaillot.

Most of the initiatives and positions we have just recalled date back to the decades that saw the emergence and development of "social movements". But we can also recall that, despite his age, Jacques Gaillot had in no way given up the fight: we thus find him among the signatories of the marches against austerity organised by the Front de Gauche in the mid-2010s or, much more recently, in the spring of 2022, in support of the camp organized by the DAL (homeless movement) at the Place de la Bastille .

In conclusion, let us add that Mgr Gaillot did not limit his commitments to the field of what is commonly called "social movements": he has sometimes courageously ventured into the realm of politics, even party politics. Thus, in the

spring of 2002, alongside the journalist Daniel Mermet, the writer Dan Franck and the film-maker Ken Loach, Jacques Gaillot was one of the personalities - actually quite rare, but of quality! - to support a brand new presidential candidate, Olivier Besancenot...

Jacques Gaillot, "bishop of the homeless, the undocumented, the unemployed": present!

Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [Gauche Ecosocialiste](#).

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[1] The "sans" is a French abbreviation for the sans-abri, sans-emploi, sans papiers that is homeless, unemployed, undocumented and all other categories lacking basic rights.