Abbé Pierre: A life of struggle

Henri Grouès, known as "Abbé Pierre", born 5 August 1912, in Lyon, France.

1918  Student at the Minimes then Jesuit middle schools in Lyon.

1931  Through a legal act, renounces his share of the family heritage and distributes what he owns to various charities. Enters the Capuchin order under the name of Brother Philippe. First meeting with Father Henri de Lubac, theology professor (and future cardinal).

1938  Ordination as a priest on 14 August. The day before, second meeting with Father de Lubac, who tells him: "Make just one prayer to the Holy Spirit; ask it to grant you the anticlericalism of the saints."

1939  Curate at the Saint-Joseph basilica in Grenoble, France

1939-40  Mobilized as non-commissioned officer in the Alps and Alsace. Suffers from pleurisy.

1940-41  Convalescence; hospital chaplaincy in La Mure (Isère, France).

1941-42  Chaplaincy at the public orphanage in La Côte-Saint-André (Isère).

1942  June: named by the Bishop as curate of Grenoble cathedral. The day after the roundup of Jews in the Paris Vélodrome d'Hiver by French police, Abbé Pierre takes in Jews who escaped an initial roundup in the unoccupied zone. He organizes a workshop to make false identity papers and helps Jews cross the border into Switzerland.

November: along with another French Resistance member, he carries the totally paralyzed youngest brother of General de Gaulle in his arms to get him as well as his wife across the Swiss border. In the Massif de Chartreuse, he opens up a place of refuge, and then combat, for young "dodgers" who refuse mandatory work service in Germany.

End of year: third meeting with Father de Lubac, who recommends him a completely trustworthy person, capable of keeping secrets and of a spiritual life: Miss Lucie Coutaz. At the request of Father de Lubac and after two days of reflection, she agrees to be Abbé Pierre’s colleague. This is the beginning of 39 years of collaboration, during which Miss Coutaz became the cofounder of Emmaus.

1942-44  Goes underground: participates in the Resistance and creates resistance movements that shift from the Chartreuse to the Vercors region to become part of the "Armée du Vercors."

1943  At one of the most critical moments of the Resistance, Abbé Pierre performs his first fast, for one week, in La Grave (Isère), in a presbytery facing the wonderful La Meije mountain.

1944  May: arrested by the German army in Cambo-les-Bains (Pyrenees region). Escapes, crosses Spain and leaves from Gibraltar to reach Algiers.

17 June: first meeting with General de Gaulle, in Algiers.
1944-45 Chaplain of the Naval Academy in Casablanca, then director of the Seamen's Home in Paris.

1945-51 Member of Parliament, representing Meurthe-et-Moselle

President of the Executive Board of the World Federalist Movement for four years.

Creation of the Emmaus International Youth Hostel in Neuilly-Plaisance, France, for the reconciliation of the youth of European countries.

1945 Historic meeting at Abbé Pierre's home between Father Teilhard de Chardin (man of science) and the mystic philosopher Berdiaëff. The meeting results in a total failure; the two men were unable to understand one another in their respective languages.

1948 Meeting with Albert Einstein, near Princeton University (United States). Abbé Pierre (who had just presided over the closing of a Federalist Convention in Minneapolis) had a famous conversation on the "three explosions" with the scientist.

Meeting in Paris with Habib Bourguiba, then an underground activist for the independence of Tunisia. Abbé Pierre tries to convince him of the possibility of reaching independence without war, which is what will happen in 1956.

1949 Along with André Philippe, he proposes a parliamentary bill recognising conscientious objection.

He undertakes the (often illegal) construction of dwellings for homeless families. He welcomes a man in despair into his home, marking the foundation of the first Emmaus community (Neuilly-Plaisance, France).

1949-54 Foundation of several other Emmaus communities. Action to help families without homes.

1954 "Goodwill uprising" in Paris and in the provinces: during a terribly cold winter, Abbé Pierre asks Parliament for 1 billion francs, which is at first refused. Three weeks later, Parliament unanimously adopts not 1 but 10 billion francs of funds to build 12,000 emergency homes immediately throughout France for the most underprivileged.

1955 Trip to the United States and to Canada

Meeting in the Oval Office of the White House with President Eisenhower. Abbé Pierre gives him the English-language version of Boris Simon's book "Abbé Pierre & the Ragpickers of Emmaus" with this dedication: "If, for the war against extreme poverty, we're not able to ask youth as much sacrifice and heroism - if we have to - than we had asked it for the war against tyranny, then it's not worth it to ask so much sacrifice, because the victory for justice will soon be more than moribund."

Meeting with the King of Morocco, Mohammed V, who had sent the crown prince to see Emmaus’ work in France for three days. The King receives Abbé Pierre and asks Emmaus to create an action for the elimination of Moroccan slums. IRAMM (Institute of Research and Action against Misery in the World), created shortly prior to this by Abbé Pierre, sends two volunteers to Morocco.
Three months later, Abbé Pierre asks to meet with the King again and explains to him: "We're on the wrong track. You called on us as if we were specialists of people's housing, but we're not. There are specialists much more competent than we. If we have a specialty it's, by living close to the poor, seeing the key to their distress. But, in your country, this key is the absence of hope among rural poor. If we build acceptable housing in cities to replace the slums, we will double the harm to your society. That's because the most daring of rural youth will hurry to come to the cities. And we would deprive the inland population of those capable of being natural leaders due to their personality. We would make those destined to be the foremost in their villages the poorest of the city."

1957-58 In response to increasingly numerous appeals, travel and work in Holland, Portugal, Austria, India. Hospitalisation in Geneva and convalescence in Haute-Savoie, France.

During Abbé Pierre's illness, IRAMM changes name, removing the word "misery," which is very suggestive in rich countries but humiliating in the poor countries. It becomes IRAM (Institut de Recherche et d'Application des Méthodes de développement). Under this new form and for many long years, teams will carry out rural field activities in Morocco, and then in other countries.

Meeting with Nehru. Abbé Pierre attended the convention of the Congress Party in Nagpur. During a conversation at dusk, along with Mrs. Indira Gandhi as interpreter, Nehru declares: "In your countries, when one says 'materialist' one thinks of Eastern Europe. But ask our Indian students who have done training sessions in Moscow, Paris, or New York. They will tell you that, for them, the word 'materialist' calls up at least as much as what they saw in the West as what they saw in Eastern Europe. And something more sordid in the materialism of the West, because it's individualistic, whereas in Eastern Europe an appeal was made, no doubt tyrannically, to the common good and to the common future."

For three days and three nights, Abbé Pierre accompanies Vinoba Bave (a Hindu wise man and the youngest and closest friend of Gandhi) in his march for non-violent land reform through the State of Gujarat.

1958-59 Lectures and aid to the burgeoning Emmaus communities in the Scandinavian countries and in South America (Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru)

End of year: first trip to Argentina. During this stay, the Minister of National Education of Peru, Mr. Paco Miro Quesada sends him a telegram and the page of a daily newspaper from Lima saying: "Abbé Pierre, we need you."

In Colombia, Father Camilo Torres, then university students' chaplain, acts as interpreter for Abbé Pierre and confides to him the matter of conscience in which, as a Christian, he constantly finds himself. The world of the several hundred well-to-do families of the country is a world of people completely blind to injustice and misery. Father Torres sees the "guerrilleros" risk their lives and yet knows that many of them are inspired by the gospel. He wonders how they can be left without priests, while the priests are – as a group – in full solidarity with the middle-class world, which is blind and the cause of despair. Father Torres knows that if he had it in mind to go join the guerrilla fighters, he'd be put in a position in which he'd be killed fast, because he'd be more useful dead than alive.
In Ecuador, Abbé Pierre meets Msgr. Leonidas Proaño, Bishop of Riobamba, called the "Bishop of the Indians." A big and truly needed church was being built. Abbé Pierre said to the Bishop: "When you have finished the four walls and roof, have a big, decorated panel put at the entrance describing all the beauty that the architects had planned for the completion of this sanctuary, and write underneath that you undertake to no longer beautify the House of God for as long as a single-family in this neighbourhood or in the city lacks this foremost sanctuary, a house for living a true life of dignity."

1959
First visit to Lebanon. Lectures at the Cénacle Libanais in Beirut on the theme "Lebanon, Country of Proof": proof that religion is love and that love can found a policy. When religion is no longer love, it can ruin politics. After this lecture, the Oasis of Hope (Emmaus community of Beirut) is founded by a Sunni Muslim, a Melchite Christian archbishop, and a Maronite writer.

1959-65
Giving dynamics to the increasing number of Emmaus communities. Lectures in France, trips to Gabon, Senegal, Germany, Italy, Canada, Japan, Korea, Rwanda, Indonesia...

1962
Easter: three-month stay in Béni-Abbès, at the retreat of Father Charles de Foucault.

1963
Shipwreck of the "Ciudad de Asunción" on the Río de la Plata (Argentina). Abbé Pierre is initially declared dead. As soon as it's known that he has survived, he receives urgent requests from everywhere where Emmaus exists to prepare an international link for all the Emmaus groups. He decides on a first Emmaus world gathering.

1969
1st General Assembly of Emmaus International in Bern, Switzerland, which adopts the Universal Manifesto of the Emmaus Movement.

1971
2nd General Assembly of Emmaus International in Montréal, Canada. The statutes are adopted by 95 Emmaus associations of 20 countries.

Ten million Bengali refugees flock to India. Mr. Jayaprakam Narayan, political rival of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, calls 50 key figures from the whole world to a symposium in Delhi. France is represented by Abbé Pierre and Mr. Daniel Mayer, President of the League of Human Rights. Abbé Pierre once again meets Mrs. Gandhi, Prime Minister of India, and starts the idea of twinnings. Call to 38,000 mayors of France for cooperation twinnings with Bengali refugee camps in India. UCOJUCO (Union des Comités de Jumelage Coopération) is created, later becoming UCODEP (Union des Comités pour le Développement) before merging with other associations to found Peuples Solidaires. Several years later, this commitment towards Bangladesh will give rise to the creation of the first Artisans du Monde fair-trade shop in Paris, to which Abbé Pierre will make a decisive contribution.

1972
September: Abbé Pierre receives Dr. Zafrullah Chowdhury, a doctor from the new Bangladesh, and makes a decisive contribution to founding the Savar People's Health Centre.

1974
3rd General Assembly of Emmaus International in Paris.

1975
Awarded the Albert Schweitzer Gold Medal (Goethe Foundation, Basel) by René Lenoir, Secretary of State of the French government.
1979  4\textsuperscript{th} General Assembly of Emmaus International in Aarhus (Denmark).

1981  Given the French civic merit award \textit{Officier de la Légion d'Honneur} for his work in human rights.

1984  Launch of the \textbf{Banque Alimentaire} (Food Bank) in France, by Emmaus, Catholic Relief, and the Salvation Army.

5\textsuperscript{th} General Assembly of Emmaus International in Namur, Belgium.

"Christmas of Charity" operation with the daily newspaper \textit{France-Soir}.

26 May to 3 June:
Fasting in the Turin cathedral in connection with the \textbf{Mulinaris affair}. At the zenith of terrorism in Italy and the kidnapping of an American general, the Christian Democrat government, which the Communists accused of not being energetic enough, conducts a giant roundup of around 1000 suspects, many of whom are totally innocent. One of them, Vanni Mulinaris, is close to a relative of Abbé Pierre. For three years, Abbé Pierre makes many efforts for him and all the suspects kept in custody without trial: meeting with Mr. Sandro Pertini, President of the Republic, and with the Prime Minister, Minister of Justice, judges, and the Pope. Holds numerous public meetings in Italy.

At the start of his fourth year of custody without trial, V. Mulinaris states to the press that he wants "a trial or death." During Abbé Pierre's fast in the Turin cathedral with the approval of the cardinal there, the cardinal of Milan, Msgr. Martini, writes to Abbé Pierre: "Thank you for this courage that no one else had had, to prevent so many people from losing hope in the wait for a trial to which they have a right." Vanni Mulinaris is later found innocent.

1986  Performance of \textit{"Mystery of Joy"} (religious play written by Abbé Pierre) in Paris and then throughout France.

1987  December: Named \textbf{Commandeur de la Légion d'Honneur}, for his action in the sphere of housing.

1988  6\textsuperscript{th} General Assembly of Emmaus International in Verona, Italy. \textbf{Letter to the International Monetary Fund} on the issue of the foreign debt of Third World countries.

1989  Release of the film \textit{"Winter of '54: Father Pierre."}

1990  Participates in drawing up the \textit{"Besson Law"} in France, for housing for the most underprivileged.

Campaign for \textbf{democratic renewal in Benin} is launched and leads in particular to a meeting with the French President, \textbf{François Mitterrand}, to support this process.

1991  Trips to Burkina-Faso, Lebanon, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Canada. Letters on two occasions to Presidents George Bush and Saddam Hussein during the \textbf{Gulf War}.

\textbf{Pentecost}: fast at St. Joseph's Church in Paris along with the \textbf{"nonsuits of asylum rights"} carrying out a hunger strike without the slightest interest of the authorities or public opinion. Abbé Pierre's fast (the third one of his life) is
preceded by a letter to the Prime Minister and to the four Ministers or Secretaries of State concerned, on a Monday. On Tuesday morning, the government names a conciliator. The final result ends up being greatly disappointing, with a very narrow settlement: for just the Paris area, only 400 of around 12,000 asylum seekers obtained a residence permit in their appeal proceedings.

This affair reflects a universal problem. Dictatorships and tyrannies are not decreasing at the global level; they disappear here to reappear elsewhere. The phenomenon of "displaced persons" is now on such a scale that it cannot be left to the goodwill of nations. The HCR lacks the resources to meet the needs. Under these circumstances, Abbé Pierre wishes France to take the initiative so that this responsibility for refugees can be shared throughout the world by a qualified organization.

**Summer:** Support to 102 **squatter families** on the Quai de la Gare street in Paris, along with support from eminent personalities such as Professors Albert Jacquard and Léon Schwarzenberg, who are present during the setting up of the tents. Action on their behalf with the Ministers concerned, the prefects of the Region and Paris, and the city of Paris.

Concern about the situation of the "**Harkis**" (Algerian soldiers of the French army who opted for France during the independence of Algeria) and above all those of the second generation, especially affected by unemployment.

**24 August:** Meeting with the **Dalai Lama** in Dordogne, France, during inter-religious seminars for peace. Abbé Pierre asks him: "explain to me what prayer is for you." During the second meeting on "the anger of love." Abbé Pierre emphasizes the necessity of channelling this anger towards real objects. If not, whatever is unknown or alien becomes the scapegoat. In the evening, at the request of around 15 Buddhist novices in three-year isolation in this region, long discussion based on the questions that came to them after recently reading Pierre Lunel's book, "L'insurgé de Dieu".

1992
**September:** 7th General Assembly of Emmaus International in Cologne, Germany.

1996
**September:** 8th General Assembly of Emmaus International in Paris, at the Palais de l'Unesco. Emmaus International is now made up of nearly 350 groups in 42 countries of the world.

1998
**24 August:** 60th anniversary of Abbé Pierre's priesthood in Assisi, Italy.

1999
**50th anniversary of Emmaus** and of the encounter between Georges, the first Emmaus community member, and Abbé Pierre.

**September:** 9th General Assembly of Emmaus International in Orléans, France.

2001
Presented with the **Grand Officier de la Légion d'Honneur** insignia by President Jacques Chirac.

2003
**November:** 10th General Assembly of Emmaus International in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.

2004
**January:** Requests to no longer appear in the hit parade of most loved personalities of the French.
February: 50th anniversary of the Goodwill Uprising. Abbé Pierre launches a new appeal for each person to act at his or her own level to fight extreme poverty and its causes.

July: is raised to the rank of Grand’Croix de l’Ordre de la Légion d’honneur, the highest French distinction. "This prestigious distinction, the highest that can be given in France, crowns your fight against exclusion, misery, and injustice. It rewards an extraordinary man, a figurehead who has devoted his life to the defence of the rights and dignity of the human individual. It rewards the distinguished services that you have given to our country, whose influence has benefited from the generosity of your action" – Jacques Chirac, president of the French Republic.

October: goes to Algeria at the initiative of the Abbé Pierre Foundation for the Housing of the Underprivileged, in order to inaugurate 85 individual and earthquake-resistant houses following the earthquake that struck the northeast of Algeria in 2003.

2005
In relation to the crisis in the French ‘banlieues’ (suburbs), Abbé Pierre appeals to ‘the honour of our country’ and condemns the local authorities who refuse to build social housing.

October: Takes part in the European Days against contemporary slavery in Florence, Italy.

2006
Again calls upon the French parliament over the issue of housing. In a letter to Jacques Chirac he denounces the evictions from the Cachan squat in France.

October: During an Emmaus International meeting on the right to drinking water access for all he ends his speech with the words: "Let’s continue, continue!".

2007
Passes away on 22 January in the Val de Grâce hospital in Paris at the age of 94. A national funeral is held at Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris.

Buried in the cemetery in Esteville (Seine Maritime).

Emmaus International has 317 groups in 36 countries on 4 continents.

Decorations
Grand’Croix de la Légion d’Honneur
Military Cross with bars, for World War II.
Decorated for the French Resistance
Various foreign decorations