

Jean Charlot

By Msgr. Daniel J. Dever

Jean Charlot, who lived among us so simply and humbly and died as he lived, was a genius of the faith. He possessed a remarkable sense of the presence of God and spent his life proclaiming that presence.

The visible things of this world, St. Paul said, manifest the invisible. But Charlot knew how very hidden the invisible presence could remain under the burden of things recklessly produced and persuasively promoted by an advanced technological society.

Redirecting our attention to men and women and children at work, at play, at family, at prayer, Charlot invites us to glimpse our common humanity, bearing the marks still of the hand that gave it life.

In the local cultures of France, of Mexico, of Polynesia, Charlot found the subjects, powerful enough in their simplicity, their honesty, their authenticity to awaken us to the unity of nature, of people of the transcendent. Banana leaves and Hala roots, and rocks — especially rocks — and kitchen chairs and angular dogs lent themselves to the same transparency.

Everything Charlot wanted to say when he contemplated with reverence and wonder the mystery of the family of man, was totally expressed for him in a word — the Word made flesh,

dwelling among us. Charlot is the artist par excellence of the Holy Family. In Bethlehem and Nazareth and in all the "little places" of the world are the well-springs of our creation and recreation.

Every kitchen and every workshop from Brittany through Mexico to Hawaii and Fiji stir in us another memory, and each child wrapped and strapped to its mother never lets us lose sight of that Mother and that Child.

Charlot was profoundly sensitive to the darker side of humanity and the forces of good and evil in combat. For him the darkness never finally snuffed out the light. He knew, after all, where the sword of Abraham made its fatal thrust. The bloody likeness of Veronica's veil was seen as a mark of glory, and the story of His death and burial was, according to Charlot, "the last chapter, less one."

Of himself he wrote: "At the sound of the trumpet my own grave will be emptied and willy-nilly, I shall leave the cool and quiet of the earth and bodily enter eternity."

Jean Charlot's art and life have about them an uncommon unity — they point in the single direction he walked with clarity and courage. For Zohmah, his wife and friend, for John, Martin, Peter, Anne and for their children, and for all of us, he did all of this and filled us with laughter besides.