



Patching it

by Martin E. Marty

BROTHER WALTER, let's call one of the two main characters in this story, because I think that is what he told us his name was. Jean Charlot is the other main character, though he plays a secondary role. Brother Walter was sitting on the chapel steps at St. Benedict's Abbey in Atchison, Kansas. Six members of three generations of Martyrs, day-tripping in Atchison, came across him as we approached the Barry Byrne-designed chapel. The centerpiece of the large chapel is a fresco by Jean Charlot, whose work I recalled because he had influenced a liturgical artist of my acquaintance long ago. Charlot was, I suppose, a major minor artist for the church. He was some cuts below the Lurçats and Légers and Manessiers who did occasional work for the church. He was myriad cuts above the artists who had decorated most Catholic churches of the day.

Remembering my friend and his regard for Charlot, I casually asked our guide, "What kind of person was Charlot?" Brother Walter did not seem to hear the question. Later, as we studied the fresco, he said, "Do you see the slightly darker patch on the figure that is holding the spear toward Christ?" We did. "Do you know how it got there? When M. Charlot was executing this with his assistant Stephen, I, a lay brother, was the scaffold builder. One night I bumped the wall at that point and caused damage. Next morning when Charlot came in he instantly saw a white spot of plaster. He almost lost himself: "Who did that?" Walter said, "I got up my courage and said, 'I am sorry, M. Charlot; I bumped it with a steel scaffold.' For a second Charlot was silent. Then he turned and said, 'Stephen, patch it!' Stephen did, and the artist never brought up the subject again. You asked what kind of person Jean Charlot was. He was that kind of person."

Later, in the undercroft chapel, Brother Walter told how before the

council he would not have been thought of as a monk. The lay brothers ate at separate tables, and attended mass separately in that humbler place. "When he was all finished upstairs, Jean Charlot wanted to thank us lay brothers who had helped him. He made this nice little fresco [of Jesus the child in Joseph's carpenter shop], and never said a word about it. He just gave it to us. You asked what kind of man Jean Charlot was. He was that kind of man."

I know nothing else about the incidents, the context or Charlot; he may have been a temperamental artist, practiced skulduggery in dealing with clients, and pursued a private life that would have interested tabloid reporters. Or he may have been a saint.

For one summer afternoon, however, he was the "kind of person" whose whole being could be summarized in three words—"Stephen, patch it!"—and in one gesture of kindness to the lay brothers. I was envious of a life that could leave such a clear impression. And a bit sad in my awareness that a way of life is waning, a way in which such people could leave such impressions on such persons as Brother Walter. I wish the grandchildren had been old enough to have been influenced by the exchange. I hope their parents and grandparents were, since they also live lives that need patching, in a world that needs acts of generosity.

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