

**PROMINENT ASSUMPTIONIST Pierre-Fourrier (Leon-Felix) MERKLEN (1875-1949)**

**Scholar, Editor and Nazi Resister**

One of Fr. Merklen's colleagues wrote of him after his death, "He was a born leader. It was impossible to resist his charm any more than the optimism that flowed from his every pore. Throughout his life he maintained a youth of spirit that continued to win over hearts. He was one of those rare individuals who was always able to see the big picture and seemed undaunted by failure or defeat and remained calm in the face of bitterness, pettiness, and calumny….like all those who are truly disciples of the Master he followed. He trusted those who worked at his side and encouraged their initiative. He inspired confidence and it was as if his very presence made every project seem possible. At the darkest of moments during the Nazi occupation, when the editorial staff of *La Croix* was being denounced and he himself the object of Gestapo hatred, I can still hear him saying to us, 'Take heart. Nothing will happen to those in the hands of Providence. The Church will ultimately triumph..."

Who was Leon-Felix Merklen? Born in 1875 in France in the Vosges Mountains, he followed in his father's footsteps by first studying law (1891-1894) before entering the major seminary and eventually joining the Assumptionists in 1896, taking the name Pierre-Fourrier. He completed his theological studies in Rome culminating with a doctorate.

Once ordained in September 1900 he was sent to the Assumptionist house of studies in Louvain where he was put in charge of a community of some 100 religious which rapidly transformed into a center for philosophical and theological studies and were he provided it with an influential review entitled *Revue augustinienne*. The young superior knew how to inspire his charges with enthusiasm, endowed, as he was, with an exceptional memory, an analytic and synthetic mind, and an intelligence that was both penetrating and organizational. But in the prevailing climate of unrest stemming from the battles being waged against modernism, suspicions began to pour down on his house and the review. He was appointed as chaplain to a community of sisters in England. He endured this trial in a spirit of faith but organized a protest among like-minded Assumptionists and former students calling for reform within the Congregation. It was at this time that the Congregation was ordered by the Vatican to align its Constitutions with the newly promulgated Code of Canon Law.

In 1919 he was named professor of philosophy at the College de l'Assomption in Nimes and in 1923 editor of *La Documentation catholique* in Paris, a weekly periodical published by the *Bonn e Presse*
reputed for its serious information about the Church, society, and intellectual trends. In 1927 he was appointed director of the Assumptionist daily newspaper
*La Croix*
and charged by the Superior general, Fr. Gervais Quenard, with a thorough transformation of the publication, breaking with its traditionalist and monarchist views and adopting a more balanced direction. Fr. Merklen's major editorials were doctrinal in content, solidly crafted, and in total agreement with the renewal envisioned by Pope Pius XI. They provided Catholic readership with thoughtful commentaries and with great serenity in the midst of ideas and events that shook the period. Against the rise of nationalistic ideologies, he put forward the universality of the Church, the directives of the Pope in favor of peace, reconciliation, and understanding between peoples. Close to Pope Pius XI, he was often received in private audience and was able to convey papal thinking with authority, as he did in two books he authored,
*La continuite pontificale (Pontifical Continuity*
) and
*Les lecons de l'encyclique Summi pontificatus*
*(Lessons of the Encyclical Summi pontificatus*
).

In 1939 the Holy See informed him that the German


LA CROIX
UN SOU
LA JOURNÉE