

# **An American in Paris . . .**

***Gerard Austin, O.P. (with Gerald Dugal, O.P.)***

Any time we widen our vision we progress on the road to final reconciliation. In one instance, we need to go beyond the limits of our American experience for two reasons: to be open to other valid approaches to life, and to be more aware of who we are in the full community of man. So I delighted in the opportunity to talk again with Father Gerard Austin, an old friend from my college days when he taught me, and now recently returned from four years of study in France. He had much to say about his experiences in France, especially about the French "revolution" of last spring. He comes to us not as an expert in French politics, nor as a scholarly student of French culture. But he comes as a man with his eyes, ears and sensitivities open: he talked with scholars, he lived with them; he had friends in the villages and he had friends in the cities. And his understanding of the French scene is a synthesis of his meetings with scholars and with people like the little lady in the cleaner's shop down the village road.

I present this article "like it happened," as I talked with Gerard, walking around the grounds of our house and sitting in his room.

*Dugal:* What did the French uprising mean? You know, what did it *really* mean?

*Austin:* First of all, I think the most important thing to remember is that it really wasn't a military revolution; that it was, as the French are fond of saying, a "cultural revolution." Since I've been back this summer, I have heard so many Americans sort of chuckle at that. They think it's just the French way of putting everything up in the clouds . . . you know, those abstract French. But it really is not something up in the clouds; it is a good description of what went on. The American press got carried away with the barricades, the burning cars, and the temporary hospital at the Sorbonne. But that's only one

small part of what took place last spring. It started out, as you know, as a student uprising, then it mushroomed. Something interesting about the students is the connection between the Parisian students and the students at Columbia.

*Dugal:* Some sort of direct planning?

*Austin:* In this sense, our own Father Chenu who is very close to the students at the University of Paris, feels there is a real communication, world-wide, among university students. Almost like they all belong to a world-wide fraternity . . . they read something in the paper that the students in Rome did and it affects them very much. What took place at Columbia influenced the French students and consequently influenced the events at the University. So, it seems to me, that the students at Paris, backed by their fellow students there and around the world, were the first to get the ball rolling. They began externally what was felt in the French soul for some time.

*Dugal:* You mean that even initially the movement was larger than a student movement?

*Austin:* Yes, and this is the real phenomenon of this century in France, the cooperation between the students and the workers. The movement began with the students but was picked up immediately by the workers. Everyone was amazed because of the traditional antipathy between the worker and the student. That sort of antipathy does not exist here in America, but in France in general only the upper classes go on to university studies. So there was this startling fact, for the first time, workers and bourgeois students sat down and talked things out together. Then it spread, everyone began airing his grievances. These disparate groups found themselves working together in a common cause. Shortly all walks of life were involved.

*Dugal:* Was this something that happened not so much because the students were actually representing the rest of the country explicitly but were simply airing their grievances and it hit a common chord with the rest of the country?

*Austin:* Right, it wasn't really planned. Once one group saw another group thinking like themselves, there was mutual support. And the snowball started going downhill, getting larger, gaining more momentum. I thought, at the time, it was like a brushfire spreading. And I felt there were about ten days when all of France stopped, except for the cares of the basic necessities of life. It was as if all of France was wondering "who am I?" "where am I going?" "where do I fit in the total picture of things?" It reminded me of a national self-study. The whole nation stopped, and reflected.

*Dugal:* Any time there is a great movement for change there is an inevitable polarization of groups: those who want to change, and those who do not want to change. Did you sense this?

*Austin:* Let me illustrate my answer this way. I would go down to the little village and talk to the people down there. I was a good friend of this little, old lady who had a cleaning shop. I thought she was a perfect example of the polarization that occurred. Once this thing got rolling she became frightened. When she saw blood she got scared and became more conservative. She went into the whole background of what France had suffered during the War, and after the War trying to repair and rebuild. It was a difficult time until DeGaulle stabilized the government. So DeGaulle and the Gaullist government, represented, for her and for so many in France, stability—and this was evident in the last vote. The backlash accounted for the overwhelming vote of confidence the government received, and cemented the polarization. People like the lady in the cleaning shop began flying the French flag, as opposed to the red flags being flown around Paris. It was one flag versus the other flag.

*Dugal:* Do you think the French movement typified the young reacting to the established world order as a lousy order, a farce?

*Austin:* Certainly it showed this. Most of the French students were from the upper-middle class. They would go back home to parents who were scared to death of the ideas of their own children, because, ironically, their children were pulling the rug out from under them. The French youth, like the American youth, are highly idealistic; they abstract from the fact that what got them into the universities and what keeps them there is their parents' money.

*Dugal:* That reminds me of something I heard Margaret Mead say last night. She said the crucial problem of today, underlying all other problems, was the generation gap. There is a new world, and it has no continuity with the old world. Older people are not interpreting the world, the past, to the young. Everything is now. The old do not listen to the young enough to be able to understand them and to make themselves credible, and at the same time, the old are assimilating the new life without understanding its meaning.

*Austin:* I agree with that very strongly, and the problem may be even more complex in France because of their reluctance to change institutional structures. The government has given a lot of promises but hasn't done a whole lot. But, basically, as you say, the problem is the same. I keep thinking of the "order in the streets" talk here in this country, the reactions Wallace stirred, and the fears developing. I saw

it right in France—obvious. I saw it with my little friend in the village who ran the cleaning shop. She saw red once she saw bloodshed—literally, red.

*Dugal:* Was there much bloodshed in France?

*Austin:* Well, I think the final count was only four dead. That's what amazes everyone in this country. If you go by the press and magazines you would think people were being killed all over the place. The thing that struck me was the lack of real violence in this "violent" revolution. When you compare it to the violence in this country, it was nothing. I remember the first death, after two weeks had passed. The French are not a violent people. They are violent in the realm of ideas.

*Dugal:* What do the French think of our violence?

*Austin:* The French are extremely interested in the United States. From living in France and Germany, I was amazed at the amount of U.S. news coverage: the papers, magazines, TV. Every day one gets news and can keep abreast of what's happening at home. And they are appalled by the amount of violence in our country—just astounded. And they cannot figure it out.

*Dugal:* You were over there when Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King were killed.

*Austin:* Yes, and the French could not believe it. Neither could I. . . . And this is a comment I heard quite often: "You never really did draw the best in politics, but now you're not going to at all, because anyone who is really gifted will shy away. You're going to get second-rate political leaders. Bobby was your last hope . . ." Those kind of statements, Bobby was your last hope; Martin Luther King was your last hope. Very bleak picture of our political scene.

*Dugal:* Do the French speculate about why we are so violent?

*Austin:* They think we are a terribly materialistic country. So much so that those who have will do anything to get more; and those who have, so project themselves and this idea to those who have not, that the have-nots will do anything to speak out their dissatisfaction. They speak a lot about our spirit of materialism and its devastating effects.

*Dugal:* Do they see this as a consequence of a highly advanced technology?

*Austin:* They do, but there is a bit of looking down their nose in one sense, because they feel, although we may be way ahead of them materially, and we have the highest degree of industrialization, and we are benefitting from this, at the same time they feel sorry for us, culturally. We are suffering cultural starvation and they are not. And

to a certain degree I agree with them. You agree with them in Paris, but then you are not so quick to agree in the villages.

*Dugal:* Do you think the revolution was a good thing for the French?

*Austin:* That cannot be answered totally now, only the future can tell. Some think the France of yesterday was changed completely. A new chapter in the history of France is being written. Probably only in the far future will historians know the full effect of last spring on France. Wherever France goes, as our Dominican Father Dalmais says, it will never be the same as before the spring of 1968, for better or for worse. But I think the sense of soul-searching, without being hammy about it, the search for authenticity, was a tremendous value. Obviously the search for authenticity is a vague thing, and you are going to have a vague groping around. But it seems to be a giant step in the right direction.

*Dugal:* Is France simply ahead of other countries?

*Austin:* Yes, oh yes! Many think it will happen shortly all over the continent. And you can see stirrings of major revolutions in many of the European countries right now.

*Dugal:* And what about the "colonies"?

*Austin:* The French were too polite to say anything to me about that, I think.

## QUARANTINED

He put a sign on his door  
"Quarantined,  
No Visiting"  
Then he sat alone, saying to himself  
there are no visitors  
because I won't permit them.

VINCENT WISEMAN, O.P.