

1954-2014 THE COMBAT LIVES ON

tam-tam: the Emmaus news wall

“Faced with their brothers dying of poverty, everyone must stand firm and work towards one common goal: to make it impossible for this situation to continue.” Abbé Pierre

 **EMMAUS INTERNATIONAL**



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number 58 | February 2014

The beginning | 1949

Abbé Pierre meets and takes in Georges Legay, later to become the first companion. Abbé Pierre goes on to create the first ever Emmaus community in Neuilly-Plaisance.



Indignation | 4th January 1954

During the night of 3 to 4 January, the French government shelve a proposal for a billion-franc loan to fund emergency lodgings. The same night, Marc, a three-month-old baby, dies in a dilapidated bus.



Abbé Pierre writes a letter to Maurice Lemaire, the Minister of Reconstruction:

“Honourable Minister, the young infant who died during the night of 3 to 4 January, as you announced your rejection of the emergency lodgings proposal, is to be buried on Thursday at 2 p.m. Spare a thought for him. Your presence at that time would be much appreciated.”

Outreach | January 1954

Statement of Robert Buron (pictured), member of parliament and former minister:

“I had known Abbé Pierre for a long time; I liked him. I could see that the housing problem was critical, so I joined the friends of Emmaus.”

“For several nights, [Abbé Pierre] had been going around Paris, giving out hot broth and food to the homeless who had been spending the night outside, sleeping on top of metro air vents for warmth.”



Shelters | End January 1954

In Paris, on Montagne Sainte-Geneviève street at the foot of the Pantheon, in protest against public apathy, a tent is erected to shelter around sixty rough sleepers.



On 31 January, the first “Emergency Committee to Help the Homeless” is founded in Courbevoie.

2014: The “uprising of kindness” by Jean Rousseau, Chair of Emmaus International

Editorial

The founding moment of Emmaus, in the eyes of Abbé Pierre himself and of other important figures in the history of Emmaus, was the day in 1949 when Abbé Pierre first met Georges Legay, the man who was to become the first Emmaus companion. In the eyes of history, in France and abroad, that founding moment was Abbé Pierre’s appeal for action on 1 February 1954. To begin with, the 1949 encounter with Georges Legay

spurred both Abbé Pierre and his secretary Lucie Coutaz into action, pricking their consciences and inspiring in them a great personal upheaval, the same that many of us would experience later on. Ever after, Abbé Pierre would muse upon the circumstances and consequences of that encounter, reminding us of them continually. In view of this, the historic 1954 appeal was more than just a request for aid triggered by the bitter winter and the homeless lives it had taken; it was an appeal to be

moved by the misfortune of others, to awake from our indifferent stupor, to stand up and take action. The 60th anniversary of Abbé Pierre’s 1954 appeal is therefore an opportunity to commemorate each one of the decisive encounters and amazing transformations that our movement has brought about. Most of all, it is a chance to take hold of that experience and use it to kick-start action all around us. Now more than ever, the “uprising of kindness” lives on.



The 1954 appeal in context

In the 1950s, France was in the midst of an unprecedented housing crisis. Abbé Pierre, who had been a member of parliament between 1945 and 1951, was the head of Emmaus, a group of companions working as builders and rag-pickers, founded in 1949. The winter of 1954 saw temperatures plummet in France. Abbé Pierre responded to the urgent situation by roaming the streets with a team of friends, Emmaus companions and journalists. He sought help at first through political channels, submitting a draft amendment for the construction of emergency lodgings. However, the draft was shelved indefinitely and many people continued to suffer and perish from the cold. At that point, he launched his appeal, which provoked the “uprising of kindness” and eventually the long-awaited political reaction.

An Emmaus International publication - 2014
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Illustration by Claire Robert (clairerobert.org)
Photo credits: Emmaus International. All rights reserved.
Printed on FSC certified paper by Loire Offset. Titoulet
Translated by: Maisie Greenwood and Alexandra Harwood

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If YOU are suffering, whoever you are, come in, eat, sleep and regain hope. Here, you are loved.

MY FRIENDS, YOUR HELP IS NEEDED!

Early this morning a woman froze to death on the pavement on Boulevard Sébastopol. She died clutching the eviction order used to turf her out onto the street the day before yesterday.

Every night, more than 2000 people huddle out in the frost, with no shelter, no bread, some almost naked. In the face of such horror, even the emergency campsites we have set up can no longer cope.

In the last three hours, two emergency aid centres have been set up. They are already full – we must open more centres everywhere. Tonight, in every city in France, in every district in Paris we need places with bedding, straw and soup, and a sign with these simple words: ‘If you are suffering, whoever you are, come in, eat, sleep and regain hope. Here, you are loved.’

A month of bitter frosts has been forecast. These centres must remain open for as long as winter lasts. Faced with their brothers dying of poverty, everyone must stand firm and work towards one common goal: to make it impossible for this situation to continue.

Let us love one another enough to do this without delay. Let one, miraculous thing emerge from so much pain: the common soul of the French nation. Thank you! Each and every one of us can help the homeless. With your help, not a single adult or child will have to spend tonight sleeping on asphalt or on a Paris railway platform. Thank you!

ABBÉ PIERRE, 1ST FEBRUARY 1954

The appeal | 1st February 1954

At midday, Abbé Pierre makes his appeal on Radio Luxembourg. Barely a moment after he has finished, the radio switchboard is flooded with calls. Donations immediately start to roll in at the Rochester Hotel.



At 11 p.m., as the temperature falls to -15°C, around a thousand Parisians gather at the Pantheon and venture out to bring in two thousand people sleeping rough on the city’s pavements.

The “uprising of kindness” has begun. Within a few days, 150 million francs and hundreds of tonnes of clothes, food and heating equipment have been collected at the Rochester Hotel, at Orsay station, in Neuilly-Plaisance and at the Parc des Expositions.

Political response | 4th February 1954

The Government acknowledges the need for the emergency lodgings. The Council of Ministers immediately adopts a proposal for 12,000 lodgings.



March - April 1954

The movement is in full swing across the whole of France. On 30 April, the first lodgings are officially opened at Plessis-Trévisse in the presence of the Minister for Reconstruction, Maurice Lemaire.



The appeal reverberates all around the world. Abbé Pierre starts to travel the globe on invitation from political, civil and religious figures, each leading their own combat to help the disadvantaged in their countries.

