

An Unknown Saint of India

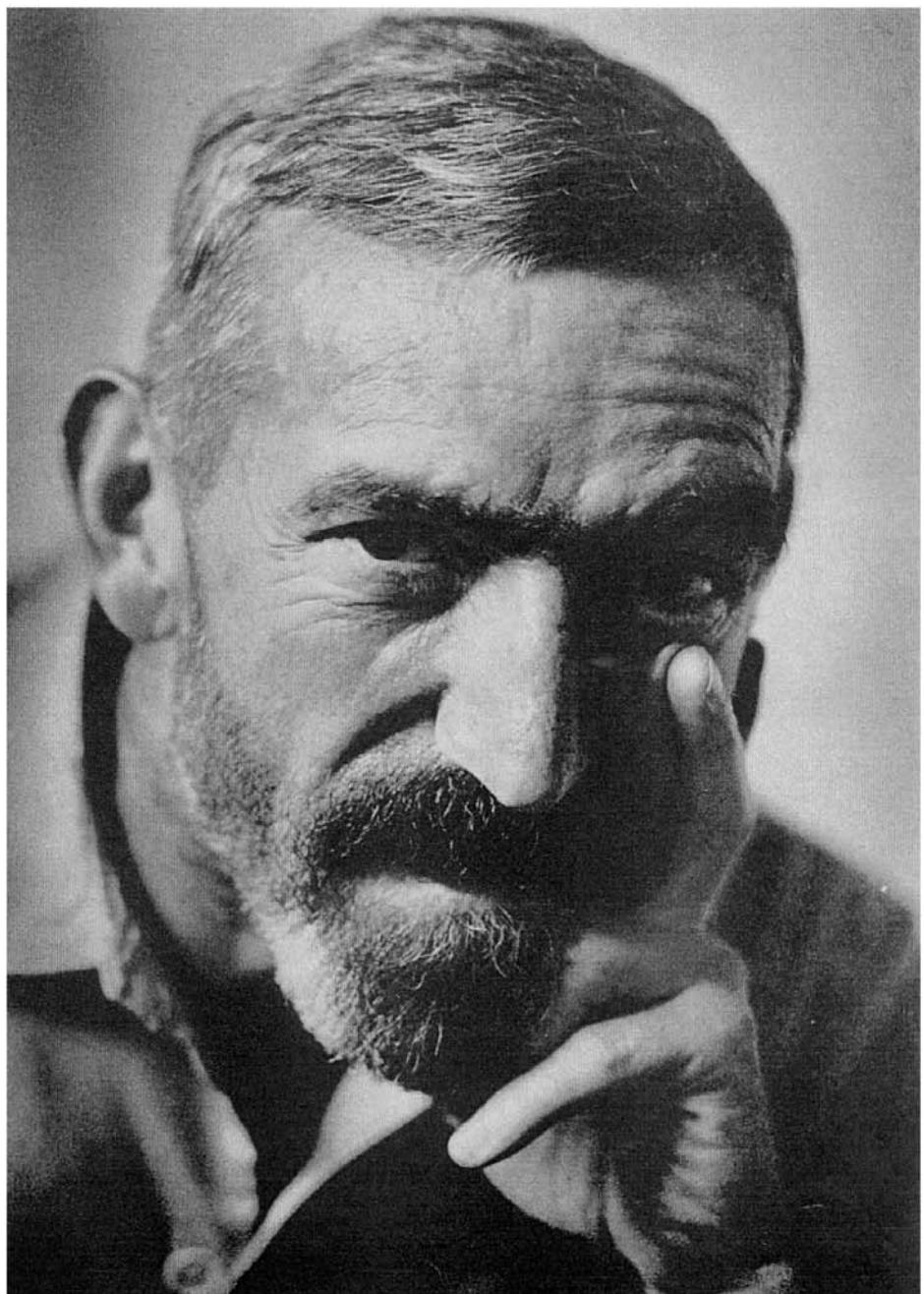
LIFE MAGAZINE February 28 1969



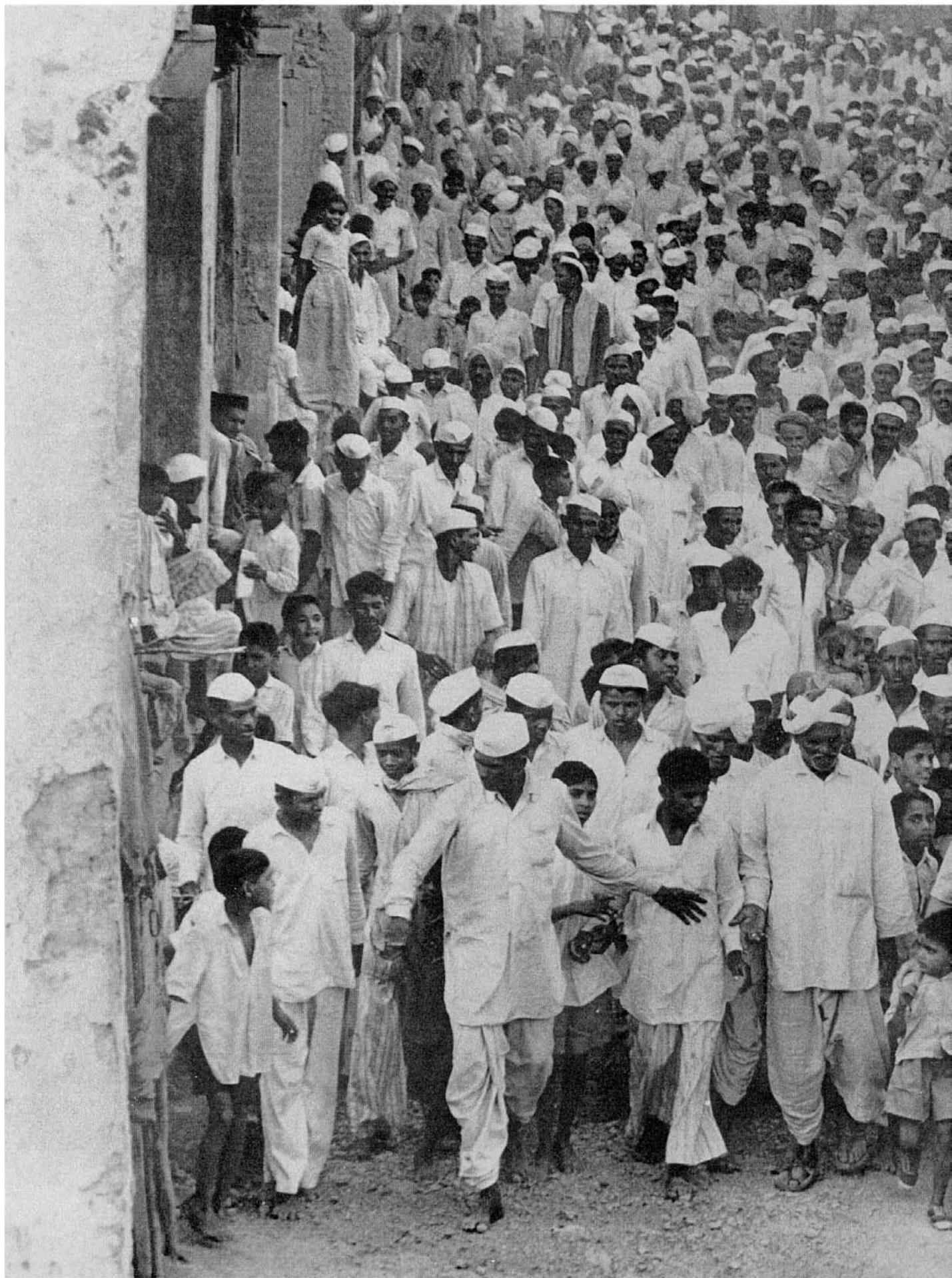
Photographed by CO RENTMEESTER

Every missionary priest is at least a candidate for sainthood, and in a most unusual way Father Vincent Ferrer has already passed far along that hard road. The compassion and accomplishments of this soft-spoken Jesuit priest from Spain already have made him adored by the Indians with whom he works—people like the woman above who turns to him in anguish because she is penniless and alone. His miracles, less religious than technical, have helped lift thousands of Maharashtra farmers out of

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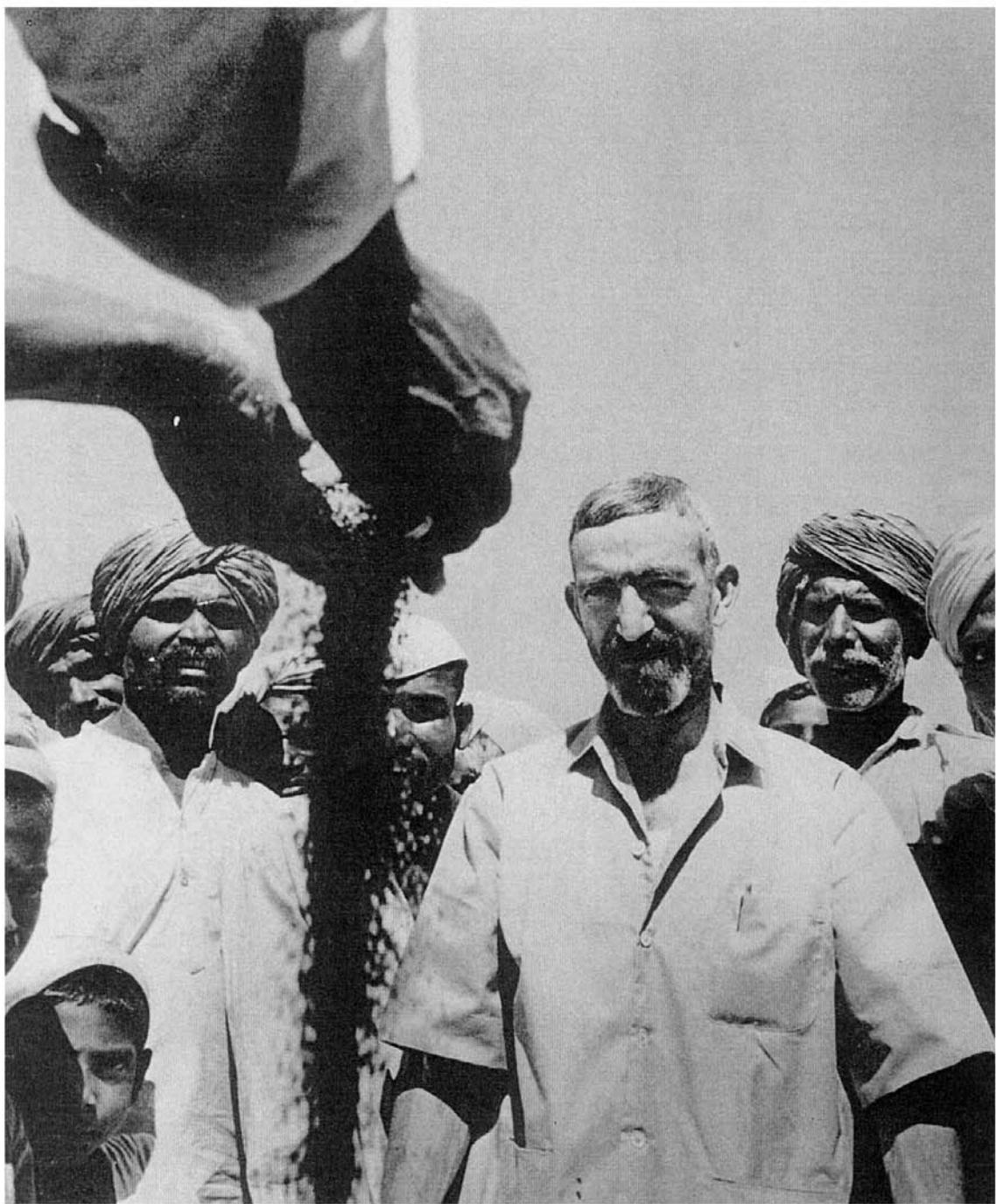
misery and starvation while making him a center of controversy among his superiors and local politicians. Last year jealous politicians forced him to leave his beloved India, but the lobbying of those he had helped brought him back. Now he intends to devote the rest of his life to the people of India. There are those in India even now who call him Baba (revered) Ferrer and mention him in the same breath with Mahatma Gandhi. To India's poor—knowing little of politics or churches—that is sainthood.

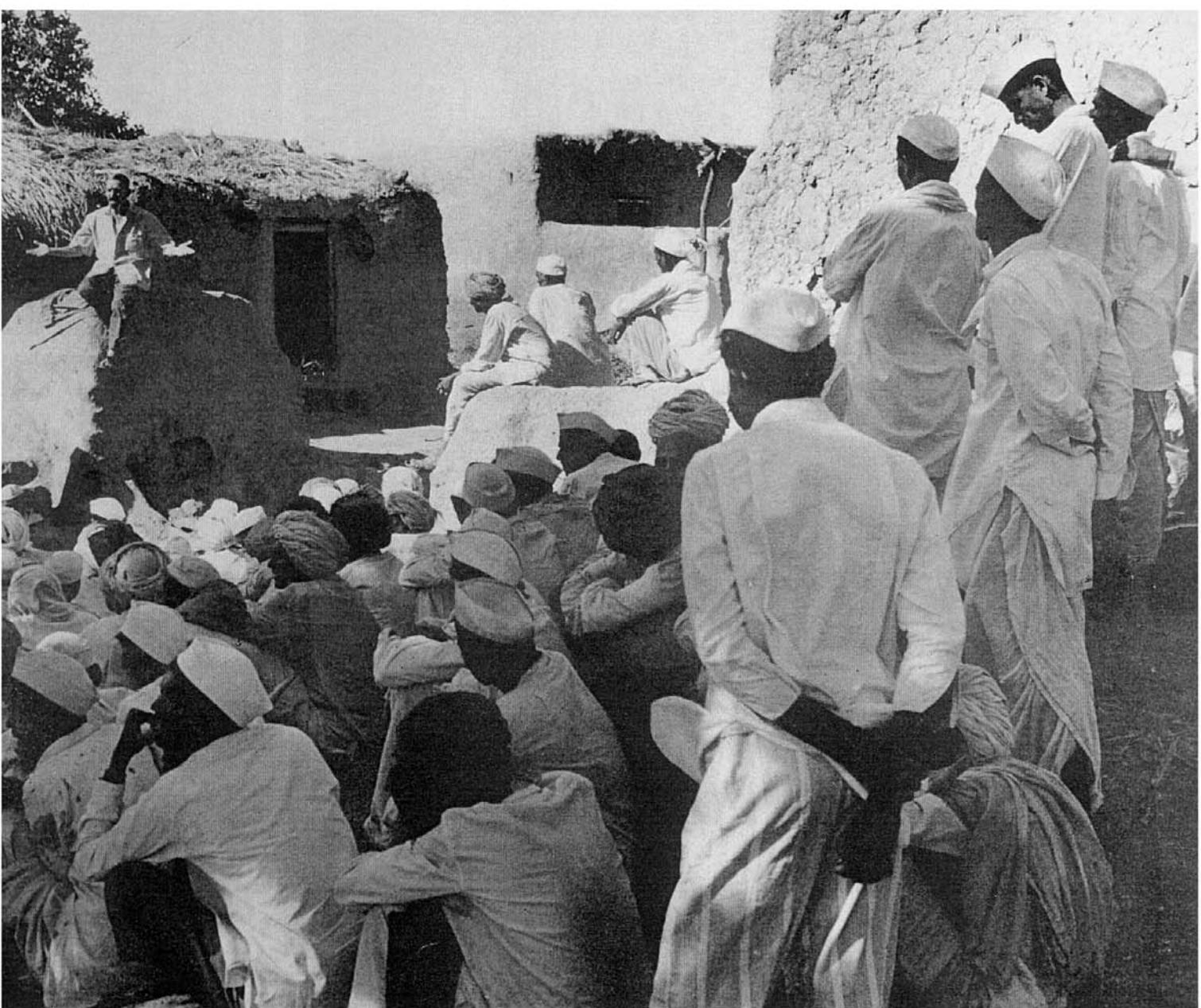


Baba's arrival in Chikhaldahol, a Maharashtra village burgeoning with Ferrer-inspired work projects, is the signal for a



turnout that engulfs him with love and pride

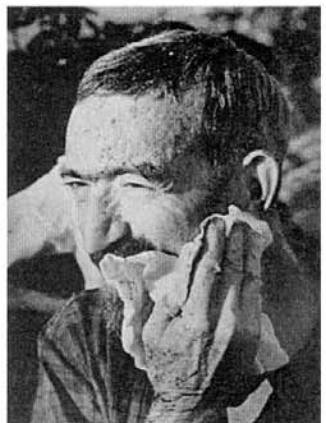


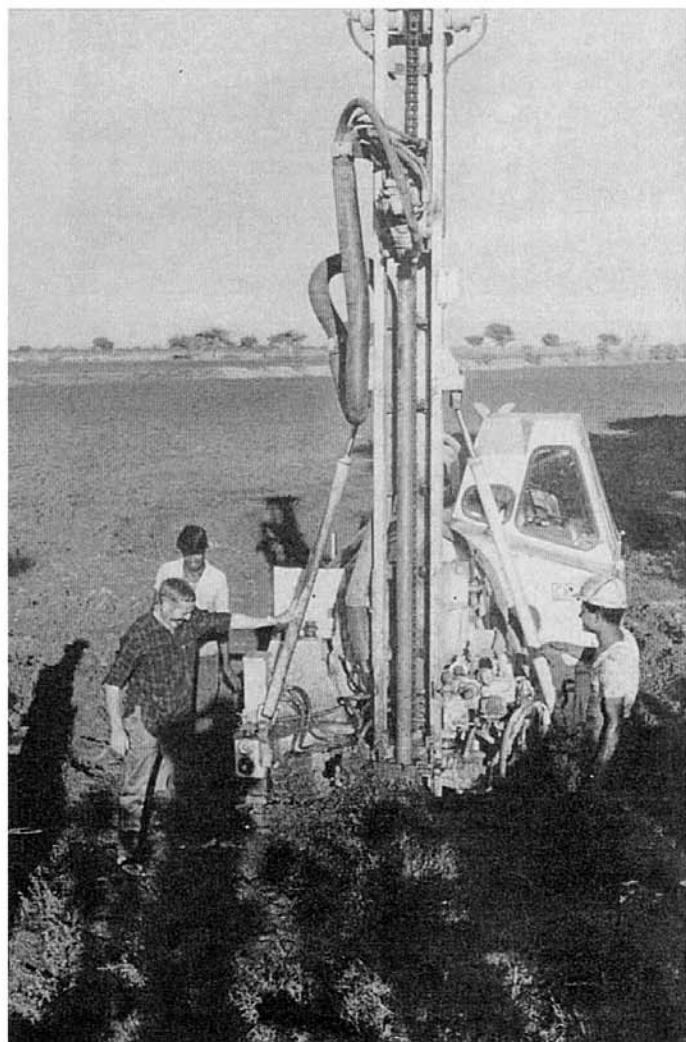


Father Ferrer spends little time talking religion and seldom even mentions God. His concern is to help desperately poor farmers coax water and crops from parched soil. When he was sent in 1958 to the Maharashtra railroad and trading center of Manmad, Ferrer started out like most missionaries by building a hospital and a school. But he quickly saw that the needs of this poor region were more elemental even than health and education. He walked from village to village distributing seed, digging wells and quietly preaching the virtues of cooperation and work—a

technique he still employs everywhere he goes. Perched on a mud wall (above), he speaks, in perfect Marathi, the truth so difficult to get across to the individualistic farmers: that only by working collectively can they bring forth water and better crops. At left, he accepts part of a crop as a contribution to his co-op, the Farmers' Service Society, and rides a bullock cart to another project. His methods have been viewed with doubt by his Jesuit superiors, who believe he isn't converting Indians, and with suspicion by local politicians, who believe he is.

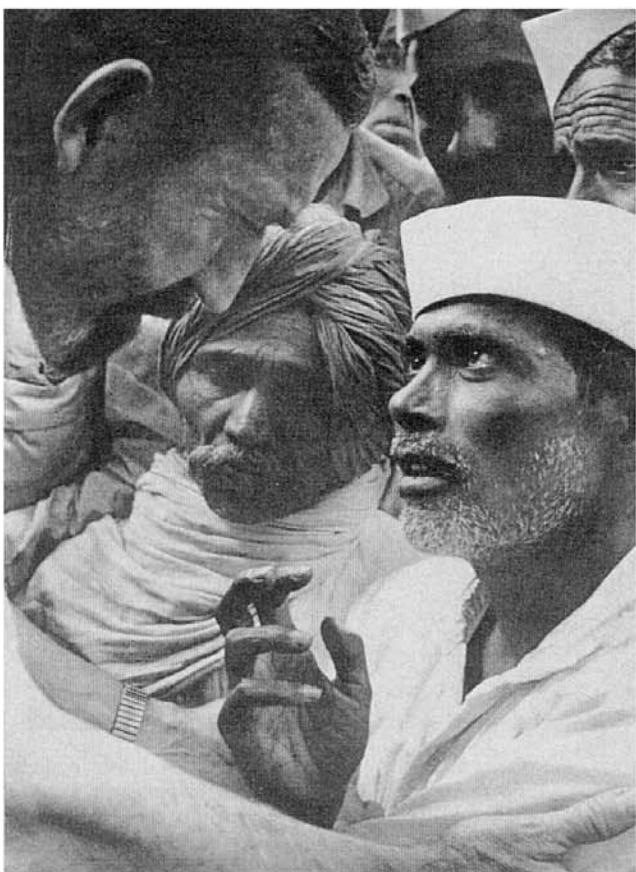
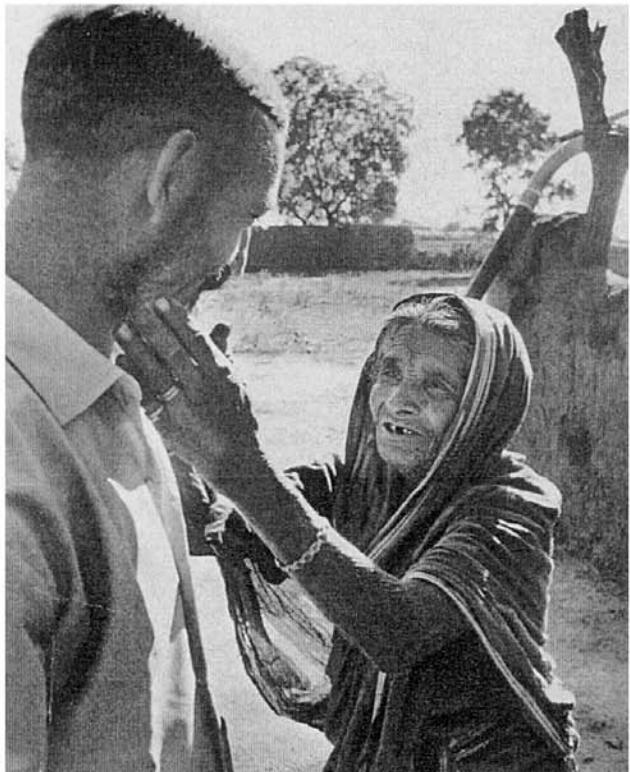






"In Cana of Galilee Christ changed water into wine," says Father Ferrer. "In Manmad He would have dug wells." In less than two years Ferrer and the co-op he started, the Farmers' Service Society, have built more than 1,000 wells in the hard-baked claylike soil around Manmad. The society, or mandal, operates on a deficit budget—the income from crops plus whatever Ferrer can scrape up on the fund-

raising trips he takes periodically to Bombay and even Spain. "We are the gangsters of the Almighty," he says. At the society's model farm near Chichondi (above), he inspects the rig at one of the newest wells and indulges in hydrological horseplay (left) with Mahadeo, his young unpaid assistant who oversees the model farm. In a field on the farm (top picture) they survey a grain planting.



People full of problems and people full of gratitude greet Baba Ferrer everywhere. The old woman (top picture) caresses the face of the man who multiplied her village's crops; the distraught man (above) is part of a throng who

brought their troubles to his *Mannad* office. At right, the priest visits a woman in a hut whose light and stove burn gas made by fermenting cow dung, a Ferrer project. He found it working, but lingered, concerned about her frailty





Father Ferrer CONTINUED

When Father Ferrer arrived at Manmad in 1958, he was 33, a newly ordained priest who had turned down an elite college teaching post to volunteer as a missionary. His new home was an abandoned mission station near a railroad siding in a semidesert of claylike brown earth. In the bungalowlike rectory he found a sad-eyed old Jesuit priest, the remnant of a bankrupt experiment in missionary enterprise. "We are wasting our time here," said the old priest. "These people are too hungry to consider conversion. They are hostile and could become vicious."

Father Ferrer got prompt verification: a group of unkempt children stoned him. When he complained to the village headman, the chief told him, "We're Hindus

Ferrer would be like stopping the monsoon, and he joined up.

The two were a great team. As students at Poona they had been thrown in with a group of Americans, from whom they picked up a racy American slang that overlay their Barcelonese-flavored English, a knowledge of movies, sports and song hits and an aptitude for getting what they wanted. They started schools and within three years were teaching and feeding 1,500 students in 28 elementary classes, and providing shelters for 800 orphans. To pay for it all they would periodically saunter into Bombay in their worn white cassocks, enter the swankiest restaurants and hotel bars—whose proprietors were friendly to them—and stage mock holdups. "I'm Laurel," Father

To make ends meet he passed a Nehru hat

here. We don't need religion, we need food."

Father Ferrer started preaching an undenominational kind of brotherly love and a cooperative approach to agriculture that often collided with the farmers' traditional apathy. But the farmers finally came to like the blue-eyed newcomer who spoke their own Marathi language with a soft Spanish accent. He persuaded one group to form a *mandal*—the beginning of his *Shetkari Seva Mandal*, or Farmers' Service Society. They would work together on a well and return a part of their income to help others to dig wells. The priest then called in a local water diviner whose technique dispensed with the usual forked stick. He walked about, kicking up little clouds of dust along an unlikely stretch of hardpan. Then he suddenly doubled up as with stomach pains and cried, "Dig." They did and 15 feet down struck a trickle that became the *mandal*'s first well.

To help finance the irrigation efforts, Father Ferrer went to Church authorities in Bombay. His superiors, interested in conversions, not cooperatives, called him "The Madman from Manmad" and sent him back. They did, though, give him something that proved more rewarding than any handout. They sent him his former seminary classmate, Father Angelo Montalvo. Like Father Ferrer, he was a Barcelonese with *brio*, who also had passed up an elite academic post—a decision that had particularly pained his superiors because he was an accomplished guitarist. He went to Manmad under instructions to curb all that play-it-by-ear engineering. But he knew that curbing Father

Ferrer would announce, "I'm Hardy," his accomplice would say antiphonally, keeping everybody covered with his guitar. Then, as Father Montalvo sang, Father Ferrer would move among the guests passing a Nehru hat.

When the Indian government, at the instigation of jealous Manmad politicians, ordered Father Ferrer out of the country last year, his movement had spread to 700 villages—and "The Madman of Manmad" was now known to his followers as "The Messiah of Manmad." Two thousand of them walked the 180 miles to Bombay to protest his expulsion. At a mass meeting attended by 25,000, a compromise—arrived at by the prime minister herself, Indira Gandhi—was announced. Father Ferrer would have to leave the country when his visitor's permit expired but would be allowed to return after a month, provided he stayed out of Maharashtra. At the news the Manmad farmers ran to him and kissed his feet.

After returning from his enforced holiday last November, Father Ferrer went to the state of Andhra Pradesh and took over from Vinoba Bhave, an ailing disciple of Gandhi, his campaign of begging land for the landless. Two weeks ago he announced that he would expand to all of India his "chain of solidarity" scheme that worked so well in Manmad. The Andhra Pradesh government is backing him all the way. When conservative politicians recently raised the old cry that he was converting Hindus, Andhra's chief minister coolly retorted that maybe there was something the matter with Hinduism. □