

THE WORKERS' APOSTOLATE

Speech delivered by Mr Léon HARMEL

on 9 January 1898

AT THE VAUGIRARD CIRCLE, PARIS

on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of its foundation



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This is an English translation of the original French text, made for the website leonharmel.com in 2026. It follows the original sentence by sentence, without cuts or additions.

The text is given in full, translated from the 1898 edition. It has been typeset in the spirit of the original: title pages and headings follow the layout of the book; the illustration has been cut out of the digitised document and restored.

The table of contents refers to the pages of this edition; each entry is a link.

The numbered notes are those of the original work; here they are numbered continuously from beginning to end. The notes marked with an asterisk * have been added for this edition, to shed light on the historical context.

Léon Harmel, le Bon Père du Val-des-Bois

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AT THE VAUGIRARD CIRCLE, PARIS

On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of its foundation

Today we are celebrating your silver wedding.

Twenty-five years of life, in our unstable times, is a great deal for a foundation that rests solely on the devotedness of its members.

At the memorable jubilee celebration of 27 December 1896, our Secretary General retraced in eloquent terms the life of the Association of Catholic Workers' Circles during this first period. Your history merges with that of the whole Association, and I see no point in going back over what Count de Mun said so well.

The future.

I would rather speak of the future; for this first jubilee calls for a second, which we must prepare every day.

The future belongs to God, it is true; but since, according to the designs of Providence, it cannot be prepared without our cooperation, it belongs to us in large measure, and it is to its preparation that we must devote all our strength, all our energies. The present slips away every minute; yet, however fleeting it may be, that moment is enough to bring about great things when we work with God.

Allow me to address myself especially to the workers who are here in such numbers at this celebration. They know the tender affection I have for them, and I know that my fellow members will not hold against me a preference that is in their hearts as much as in mine.

Aim of the Association.

My dear friends,

Let me, in a simple and familiar talk, tell you what our Association expects of its worker members.

When we open the book of our rules, we read in Article One: the aim of the Association is *devotedness*. Does this article concern only our valiant lady patronesses and the Members of the committees or district councils? Certainly not. Devotedness is not a monopoly; it is a general duty laid upon all men, whoever they may be; and this duty is so important that our Association has chosen to make its fulfilment its special aim.

Society is founded on the hierarchy of services. Now this hierarchy, according to St Dionysius the Areopagite, is like a golden chain whose successive links start from the bosom of God, plunge into the depths of humanity and then rise back to God. Every man is created to be a link in this divine chain, and so to help carry back, to the highest heavens, a triumphal hymn to the mighty and good God, whose glory is woven of his mercies.

But if everyone has a social mission to fulfil, how much more do you, my dear friends, Christian workers, who know Jesus Christ and have received abundant graces, all have strict duties of apostolate towards your less fortunate brothers.

Characteristics of the apostolate.

What are the characteristics of this apostolate? I shall point out three. It must be inspired by faith, made fruitful by study, and carried out by action.

I. — FAITH.

Faith is a light. It is the nature of all light to shine forth. That is how it multiplies its brightness and its strength. So it is with faith.

Therefore, since you have received the gift of faith, you have received the mission to make its brightness shine upon your brothers.

Do not say that you are too small: it is the nature of the works of God to be born and to grow in humility. If it could be said of the history of France: *Gesta Dei per Francos*, it can be said with even greater truth of the history of God in the world: *Gesta Dei per humiles*.

The Crib shows us this truth. It is the Crib that begins the visible work of the Redemption, and later it is the Apostles, workers like you, who will begin the work of the Church.

Pasteur demonstrated the power of the infinitely small in living organisms. They are the masters of life and death. Taine observed the same laws in the history of societies.

Everywhere, in nature, in the arts, as in nations, it is the unknown or the unrecognised who, by slow and hidden action, are the true agents of great transformations.

Your propaganda is therefore particularly effective, not only because the action of like upon like is the most powerful, but also because it is in the providential order.

Go then, my dear friends, with the confidence and the strength that faith gives you, go into the masses of the people to bring them Jesus Christ.

Those who must be brought back.

Ah! they are many in Paris who no longer know the saving God; and what have they not lost, alas, in losing him?

How many homes there are where the father is stripped of his beliefs by the newspaper he reads and the speeches he hears, of his authority by despoiling laws, of his dignity and his happiness by the grip of the social vice!

Where the mother is prevented by the conditions of work from fulfilling her mission of devotedness!

Where the child loses his faith in the schools without God and his innocence in the workshops without morality!

Every month I go up to the basilica of Montmartre for our monthly meeting of the *Fraternal Union*. I often stop to contemplate the great city spread out at my feet with its monuments, its public squares, its crowded streets. I listen to the confused voices that rise from below.

I seem to hear an immense clamour, dominated by the cries of hatred and revolt of multitudes starved of all material and moral goods. The good news is not proclaimed to these men, whose wretched lives are consumed in the exasperation of anger and in a despair without escape.

Who then will go to these crowds, distrustful of the priest and of every social superiority?

It is upon you that this mission falls. If all the workers of our circles, following the example of the angels at the crib, go and bring the branch of hope to these unfortunate men, by giving them the word of justice and love, the cradle of the divine Child will once again be surrounded by humble worshippers, who will sing once more: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to men of good will."

II. — STUDY.

But for an apostolate to be powerful, it must be made fruitful by study, for truth is a good that is won by the labour of the mind. Our founders understood this, and they put study in the forefront¹. They knew that it is through ideas that societies are transformed. Our Secretary General rightly proclaimed it: “The Association has succeeded; it has imbued minds with the great principles of social justice; the old doctrine of individualism has been defeated; people have understood how national recovery can be prepared through occupational groupings.”

Need for study circles.

But it must be admitted that this intellectual movement has not spread sufficiently in working-class milieux. And that is what I hope the new period of twenty-five years will be devoted to. I should like our successors, at the golden wedding, to be able to glorify God for complete triumph, that is to say for the conversion of the masses of the people, brought back to Jesus Christ by the ideas of social justice and Christian solidarity.

To be the instruments of this transformation, you must first of all imbue yourselves with the doctrine that you will bring to your brothers. That is why it is necessary to organise *social study circles*. Your chaplains, your directors, the educated people who devote themselves to you can help you in this; but nothing will succeed without your own initiative, without your personal energy and work.

1. We wish to pay special tribute to the Marquis de La Tour du Pin, a bold, persevering and modest thinker, who has never ceased to be in the vanguard of the great movement of ideas in which the Association of Circles rightly takes pride.

What is the study circle?

What is a Christian social study circle? By this we mean an institution where workers learn to think, to understand things, to strengthen their faith through instruction, to express their feelings in such a way as to carry conviction into the minds of others; in a word, where they learn to be apostles.

The meetings are weekly. Their length is fixed in advance to avoid excessive fatigue. There, helped by reliable men, above all by well-prepared priests, and there is no lack of them, you devote yourselves to examining the questions that the newspaper throws every day before the crowds for discussion, with false solutions.

Is it possible for men absorbed by crushing manual labour to give themselves to speculations of the mind?

Study circles among the socialists.

I shall answer you by showing you what the socialists have done. What is the principle of this immense movement that threatens to sweep the nations into the abyss? It is precisely this power of the idea, driven into minds by stubborn study. In the industrial centres especially, there are what are called schools. They are numerous, there are as many as twenty in an ordinary town; they are private sessions held every week in a café. The teacher is most often a worker who has been trained by others; he gathers a few aspirants, generally young men. They read, they summarise their reading aloud and in writing, they discuss, they learn to express their thoughts. Manual workers are brought to study difficult works such as those of Karl Marx. Their minds are stuffed with these baneful doctrines, which they do not always fully understand, but for which they are inspired with the passion of sectarians.

The work done in their minds gives these men real superiority and considerable influence in their surroundings. For, mark this, in every human gathering, the man who has ideas, or even who seems to have them, dominates the others. That is how good people are led astray. They have no answer to the sophisms set before them; they are won over, they enlist, convinced that in this way they are helping to improve their lot. And that is how the corruption of the mind, the worst of all, keeps growing in our country and is preparing the most terrible events for us.

Importance of ideas.

It is a commonplace to say that ideas lead the world, and yet people do not seem to pay heed to it. The most skilful, the most compact organisations will be swept away by the storm of ideas. Therefore, if you do not sow the truth, not only among the elites, but directly or indirectly among the masses, every dyke will be overturned by the socialist tide that rises every day.

Aptitude of Christian workers.

Now, are Christian workers less capable than others of forming an opinion on all the questions of the day? Will they be more reluctant to study the truth, so attractive, so plain and so clear, than others are to cram their minds with errors and muddled theories? Will it be hard for them to have the answer to the lies that are going round the streets, in a word to train themselves to be sowers of ideas, the passionate apostles of Christ the Saviour and Liberator? A thousand times no, quite the contrary. But the means must be taken, that is to say study circles must be multiplied.

Initiative of the workers in England.

My son Léon spent four months in England: in Bradford, Manchester, Sheffield and Leeds. To understand things properly, he chose to work with his hands in the factories, to live with his fellow workers, to eat with them, to take part in their meetings. He was able to follow workers' initiative in action.

He belonged to a club or circle that brings together more than a thousand members. Various study sections share out the questions: social, occupational, economic, cooperative, etc. They group the most devoted according to their aptitudes. It is in these sections that the *leaders* are formed, the men who lead in every branch. He attended the meetings of the *Trades' Unions*, where labour questions are debated with complete competence and remarkable moderation. The problem of cheap living is the subject of many experiments. Workers' budgets are studied and reworked in search of the necessary comfort².

My son was struck above all by the success of the temperance societies. Their followers give up all fermented drink: spirits, wine and beer, and they are almost unanimously scrupulous in keeping their pledge. In every town there are thousands of working-class members, and this solely through mutual apostolate. My son could not help expressing his admiration to the intrepid propagandists of this work, which one would declare impossible if one did not see it accomplished. But they found their action entirely natural. They were paying, they said, a social debt, by rendering their fellow workers a service that others had rendered them. What a fine example of the workers' apostolate!

2. Unfortunately England is not Catholic, and the popular organisations lack the supernatural spirit, the divine element needed to give perfection and lasting life to human works.

In Austria.

In Austria, the great movement of liberation led by Lueger, which rid the city of Vienna of a Jewish and Freemason municipality*, was almost exclusively popular. It was the men and women of the people who won this victory at the cost of long and stubborn efforts.

There would be much to say about the social mission of women, but that would take me too far.

In Switzerland.

Look at the small Swiss people: what sap of liberty and independence in the veins of these valiant men! There, citizens know their rights and fulfil their duties. Through the referendum, all are called upon to give their verdict, and they do so with full knowledge of the facts. It is the classic land of liberty, because civic education is developed there from an early age. Each person learns to manage his own affairs, to defend his rights, to expect everything from his own initiative³.

* **NOTE** In this speech of January 1898 (p. 11 and 16), Léon Harmel associates the Jews with the Freemasons among those who supposedly dispossessed the Catholics, and he celebrates the movement led in Vienna by Karl Lueger, mayor of the city since 1897 at the head of the Christian Social party, which had made hostility to the Jews one of its campaign themes. Such language was then widespread in a large part of the press and of French Catholic circles, at the time when the Dreyfus affair broke out, which deeply divided France after the unjust conviction for treason of a Jewish officer, Captain Alfred Dreyfus, in 1894. We reproduce these lines out of faithfulness to the document: they belong to their time, and this edition does not make them its own.

3. The *Lettres valaisannes* (8, rue François I^{er}) show the happy influence of the Catholics, whose number is constantly growing, even in the Protestant cantons, where they are a leaven of life and liberty.

Civic education.

Why should we not give this education in our families, in our schools, and above all in our works? Why not apply ourselves to forming citizens who are aware of their responsibility, who know that they must risk their well-being, even their lives, in defence of their rights, because these are often one with the rights of God and the salvation of the country? In this way we would prepare the emancipation of Catholics through the reign of liberty.

Democratic movement.

It is because I am deeply convinced of this necessity that, within the slender measure of my means, I have striven to help the Christian democratic movement. I wish to speak of it here only to point out the results obtained by the study circles.

In Reims, Lille, Paris, Lyon, Tours, etc., the workers have managed to produce truly remarkable work. Several have trained themselves in public speaking and have become true orators. They throw themselves resolutely into the fray of public meetings.

The movement is only five years old, and already it is powerful enough to provoke the anger of the socialists, who have understood the danger. From now on the seducers of the people meet with contradiction, and victory often crowns the intrepidity of our workers. In these struggles our apostles draw a growing enthusiasm for our Master and King Jesus Christ. They better understand his divine mission, which appears to them with its true characteristics of justice, peace and even temporal happiness. For Jesus Christ came not only to open the gates of paradise to us, but also to make life more human here below. He wishes to procure for his favourite friends, the men of manual labour, as fully as our fallen condition

allows, all the material and moral goods that flow from the practice of justice and love.

Existing study circles.

I know that in several of our circles study meetings have been organised. It is the most urgent and the most fruitful institution, but it will be truly alive only if, at the same time, its members can be hardened in the social fray; for truth that remains buried in minds, without bearing outward fruits of valour and apostolate, cannot shine forth, and fire that does not spread is very close to going out.

Can there be any question of study here without our speaking of the Saint-Étienne speech? (18 December 1892.) Our Secretary General was addressing a group of young men, almost entirely made up of clerks and workers like you.

The Saint-Étienne speech.

It will be the glory of Count de Mun to have commented on and summed up the teachings of the Holy See with an eloquence, a precision and a clarity that earned him the highest approval any orator has ever received. The letter of Leo XIII to our Secretary General (7 January 1893) makes it a duty for all of us to learn by heart these few pages, which contain the official doctrines of the Association on the most topical and most important points⁴.

This speech provides your work with a vast and fruitful mine.

General plan of studies.

If you want a general plan for your studies, you can arrange their subjects under three headings: the inquiry into the present social situation, principles and history, and finally social institutions and organisations.

4. Our readers will be grateful to us for giving them a page of the magnificent Saint-Étienne speech:

“Finally, you must mingle with the people, speak to them, organise study meetings and lectures everywhere, and face open debates.

“You have to stand up against the socialists, who alone are left standing with you amid the ruins of bourgeois liberalism, to set your doctrines against theirs, to contend with them for the soul and the mind of the people, not out of the vain pride of leading them, but out of love for them, out of sincere devotedness to their cause, to lead them peacefully to a better and more just social order, and to save them, and your country at the same stroke, from the barbarism that atheistic collectivism, in which the whole socialist programme is summed up today, is preparing for them.

“That is your work, the work that Leo XIII commands of you: that is why you must have a social programme, why you must study the true doctrine, imbue yourselves with the Encyclical on the workers, free yourselves from the conventional theories of the old economic orthodoxy and make yourselves the apostles of Catholic economics.

“That is why you must be free of every political preoccupation, and, accepting the forms, the habits of language and the institutions of democracy, have only one idea: to make it Christian.”

It is useful to understand the real situation of the working class around us, from the family, moral, economic and occupational points of view, in order to examine how we can do it good.

For the study of principles, we have the Gospel, the encyclical *Rerum novarum*, the Saint-Étienne speech. History, for three centuries, seems to have been a conspiracy against the truth. Taine has already dispelled many errors. One can make use of the pamphlets of Gabriel Ardant: *Notes sur l'histoire sociale de l'Église*, and *Papes and Paysans*. Historical errors are very important to refute, for it is by them that people claim to inspire in the people hatred of the Church, their mother, who through the centuries has always shown herself tenderly kind to the little and the humble.

Finally, there is great value in studying economic and occupational institutions, groupings, associations and, in general, everything that can fight the plague of individualism, struggle against isolation and bring relief to the sufferings of our brothers.

Design of the founders of the Association.

My dear friends, remember the birth of the Association, so magnificently told by our Secretary General. It was by the glow of the fires that were devouring Paris, amid the horrors of civil war, before the dying fatherland, that our founders courageously rose up to devote themselves to the salvation of society. Their thought was certainly not merely to raise in France a few hundred refuges of preservation and perseverance, to keep the faith of a certain number of workers. Their ambition was to win over the misguided multitudes whom they had fought with sorrow. Their ambition was to give back to God the whole people of France.

Now we cannot flatter ourselves that we shall reach this goal completely without your help, without your active devotedness, without your generous initiative.

Oh yes, my dear friends, study; then be sowers of ideas, and you will have as your reward the harvest of souls and the recovery of the country.

III. — ACTION.

As we have said, study is a preparation for action, which is the final goal.

Your action must be bold in claiming justice and truth, indulgent and kind towards opponents, beneficent towards all.

Let us be bold.

Boldness has too long been the monopoly of the wicked. It is through boldness that they triumph, despite the weakness of their cause, and it is through their timidity that the good succumb, despite the strength of truth. For we must be convinced of this: truth has an intrinsic strength that keeps alive in souls, even the most misguided, a secret attraction for light and justice. In the battle of ideas, he who possesses the truth has the right and the duty to be bold in serving it. It is the truth that sets free.

The awareness of our rights.

We must also be aware of our rights as citizens and as Christians. It was the Catholics, led by the bishops, who made France. The Freemasons and the Jews stole it from them to exploit it for their own profit^{*}. Must we tolerate any longer that these newcomers confiscate our liberties and refuse us even the common law granted by the most sectarian Protestant countries, such as England, Holland, Sweden and Norway?

^{*} **NOTE** See the note on page 11.

Appealing to French justice and generosity.

In every French soul the passion for justice vibrates, and when you appeal to this feeling, you will always be heard.

Remember that France is, by tradition and by temperament, the generous nation par excellence. This instinctive quality gives her an attraction, often unconscious but real, for Jesus Christ. So speak boldly of the divine Worker of Nazareth. It is enough to awaken the soul of the people to stir up in it enthusiasm for the God of the Crib and of Calvary, who has always remained the God of the Franks.

Kindness towards opponents.

You must be indulgent and kind towards opponents. They are your brothers. Their errors come from prejudice, from ignorance and from the surroundings in which they have lived. They are often sincere and, when the torch of truth is made to shine before their eyes, they yield and are all the more ardent in defending it as they feel its value more. Your opponents of today will be your best friends tomorrow. Tomorrow they will be the most intrepid defenders of your cause; so be kind to them and, while fighting their errors, never wound their hearts.

Beneficent action for all.

Finally, our action must be beneficent, for to a Christian, to act is to love actively. To go to the people is to bring them ever more justice, ever more love, not only by speeches but by deeds; it is to love man through Jesus Christ; it is to carry the burdens of those who are sinking under the load; it is to fulfil the word of Our Lord: "What you do to the least among you, you do to me"; it is, in a word, to put oneself in the worker's place, to know his needs and to work unceasingly to improve his lot.

You know the institutions of every kind that have been attempted in recent years. All of them belong to you, and, one after another, with an energy sustained by faith and an intelligence enlightened by study, you will found the organisations best suited to your surroundings.

Drawing inspiration from Our Lord and his Vicar.

And now, my dear friends, where will you draw the strength and courage needed for this mutual apostolate to which we invite you? First of all, no doubt, from Jesus in the Eucharist, who unites himself to our souls and communicates his power to us; but also in Rome, from the Sovereign Pontiff, the hearth of all light and all love, because he is on earth like a prolongation of Jesus Christ, like a second Eucharist. You will see Leo XIII, the Father of the workers, the great dispenser of justice and the great peacemaker of the 19th century; he loves you tenderly, he will lodge you in his palace and will shower you with his tenderness.

Affection of Leo XIII for the workers.

His affection does not date from yesterday, for here is what he wrote when he was Bishop of Perugia:

“To soften the harshness of labour and to interrupt in good time its painful continuity, does anyone fail to see, for example, the fitness of Sundays and Christian feasts, which, at regular intervals, come to bring religious joy into the families of believers? Just as, on a long journey undertaken in the desert under the burning sun, the traveller comes upon, with inestimable delight, oases where sturdy trees lend him the longed-for shade of their foliage, and the meadows the soft carpet of their grass; so to the Christian worker these blessed days bring rest for the body, and for the soul ineffable consolations. Then the poor man, shaking from his back the dust of the fields and the

workshops, breathes in his holiday clothes a better air and a sweeter life, remembering that God had not created him to remain forever harnessed to the chariot of matter, but to remain its master and lord. For him is this sun, which sends him its rays as scouts of liberty; for him are the hills, which send him their intoxicating fragrances; for him, these meadows, which invite him, his wife and his beloved children, to come and tread their green grass in peace; for him, the whole creation of God, whose flowery basket will seem to him, on these days of rest, more lovely.....

“On such days, the innocent joys of the family cease to be a desire and become a reality. It is then that the worker, with his wife on his arm and his children around him, exercises the noblest and gentlest sovereignty: he knows his subjects, who are the greatest portion of his heart; he is known by them, takes exact account of their needs; and the love of work and of thrift is quickened in this proletarian home and satisfies all its members⁵.”

The Pope awaits us next August.

It is the same Father who awaits you at the beginning of next August.

Come with us to rest your weary souls in this oasis of minds and hearts.

That wonderful idyll which the Bishop of Perugia sang to the suffering of his time, he will repeat to you with the accents of his vibrant soul, which will penetrate your hearts and leave there a long furrow of love and peace.

He will send you to your strayed brothers, saying to you: “Bring them the expression of my fatherly tenderness. Make them hear the voice of social and Christian justice. Love them as I love you. Sow

5. *Univers*, 2 January 1898.

hope and joy around you, so as to continue the work of the divine Worker of Nazareth.”

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