

ASSOCIATION OF CATHOLIC WORKERS' CIRCLES

ADDRESS

DELIVERED BY

MR LÉON HARMEL

AT THE GENERAL MEETING OF THE LYON COMMITTEE

UNDER THE PRESIDENCY

OF HIS GRACE THE ARCHBISHOP

24 November 1887

LYON

PITRAT AÎNÉ, PRINTER

4, RUE GENTIL, 4

1888

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The text is given in full, translated from the 1888 edition. It has been typeset in the spirit of the original: title pages and headings follow the layout of the book.

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

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Your Grace,
Gentlemen,

At a general meeting of the members of the Association of Catholic Workers' Circles, what could we speak to you about, if not our dear Association, to which we have devoted our lives?

Its name hardly matches its aim; it has caused many misunderstandings which have hindered our progress. *Catholic Workers' Circles*: such is, in fact, the ordinary and merely partial formula that we thought we could give our Association from the very first hour, whereas its true aim is the devotedness, in all its forms, of superiors to inferiors. I shall tell you in a moment that the definitive formula of our ideal is the corporation. We would have liked to change our first name and choose one that indicated our true aim, but the wish of His Holiness decided us to keep our original name.

To define our Association, one would have to say that it is a work of resurrection: for minds, through the spreading of doctrine; for the family, through the restoration of responsibilities; and for the world of labour, through the Christian organisation of the trade and of economic institutions.

I

From the point of view of doctrine, we can affirm that no society has ever been more submissive to the teaching of the Church, nor above all more anxious to possess the whole truth, so as to spread its beneficent light under the supervision and direction of our pastors.

We are convinced that the fruitfulness of our social action will be in proportion to our perfect obedience not only to the orders but also to the counsels of the divine light living in our midst in the person of Leo XIII and in that of our bishops. For deeds are begotten by ideas, and it is by sowing ideas that one reaps acts.

That is why we asked the Holy Father to place us under the authority of a cardinal protector. His Eminence the Cardinal Vicar, Mgr Parochi, was appointed. He receives our minutes and our publications, and we undertake nothing of importance without having consulted him.

In each diocese, we beg of the fatherly kindness of Their Lordships the Bishops the appointment of a diocesan protector, so as to keep ourselves under the authority of the bishop at the same time as under the authority of the Vicar of Jesus Christ.

Our council of studies, which counts eminent theologians among its members, applies its learning to the questions of labour, credit and property. Under the title *Questions sociales et ouvrières*, a first volume has been published in which the ideas of the Association on the system of labour are set out.

During our recent and magnificent pilgrimage of the workers' associations to Rome, His Holiness Leo XIII, the Pontiff of the social question in all its forms, was pleased to encourage and approve our work.

Everyone remembers the memorable words in which he settled, with admirable wisdom, a point still debated or still obscure for Cath-

olics. Allow me to quote this paragraph:

“No doubt the intervention and action of the public authorities are not indispensably necessary when, in the conditions that govern labour and the exercise of industry, there is nothing that offends morality, justice, human dignity or the domestic life of the worker; but when one or other of these goods is threatened or compromised, the public authorities, by intervening as is fitting and in a just measure, will do a work of social salvation; for it belongs to them to protect and safeguard the true interests of the citizens who are their subjects.”

Notice how the Holy Father separates himself completely from the State socialists, by basing the need for the intervention of the authorities not on *reason of State*, but on the recognition that the higher goods of humanity, morality, justice, human dignity and the domestic life of the worker, are threatened or compromised.

Notice, on the other hand, how he separates himself from that *absolute* liberalism according to which individual initiative should always be enough to safeguard these higher goods, which are at once the rights of man and the rights of God. Between this socialism and this liberalism lies the *truth*, formulated for the first time in an official teaching which we have received with the docility of a child, in order to submit our faith and our Christian action to it.

For the spreading of our ideas, we have a weekly newspaper, *la Corporation*, and a monthly review, *l'Association*; a Catholic press union, in which we have been able to gather journalists of different political shades on Christian social ground; regional meetings almost every month in different parts of France; and finally, popular lectures.

We strive to show ourselves submissive sons of the Church by making those around us understand that the truths taught by our immortal Mother, ever young, ever radiant with divine wisdom, alone can save society, in the nineteenth century as in the centuries before.

II

To set to work, we first had to labour for the resurrection of the family. What does the family of today lack? The exercise of authority by the parents, the practice of respect by the children.

Now, experience has proved it to us: we can rebuild this social unit only by grouping each of its elements, fathers, mothers and children, according both to age and to situation, in different associations, special schools in which the education of individuals will be made anew.

Each of them bringing back to the home the spirit of devotedness and responsibility drawn from our works through the practice of social duties, we shall have saved the family by working to save society.

What is social duty? It is what we call the *charge of souls*.

When we say *charge of souls*, we do not forget that this apostolate falls by a special title to the ministers of the Church who have received from her the direction of a part of the flock. We know that, in the language of canon law, the Sovereign Pontiff, the bishops and the pastors have the charge of souls in a special and exclusive sense.

But could we forget that it is written: *Mandavit Deus unicuique de proximo suo*? You hear it: God did not advise it, He commanded it, *mandavit*; and to whom? He does not say that well-born souls, chosen hearts, may or should exercise the apostolate; He imposes this obligation on each one of us without distinction. Now the word of God is not open to debate. We therefore distinguish between the charge of souls and the titles on which it rests. This mandate is in some way official, that is to say, it flows from a positive order, or else it is of natural law. In the first case, it falls to the pastors; in the second, to all of us, *unicuique*. As for the measure and extent of this duty, we lay down as a principle that every social superiority, *fatherhood*, the *employer's office*, *rank*, *birth*, *standing*, *education*, *intelli-*

gence, wealth, imposes duties towards inferiors. All these advantages are given to us for the good of others, and God never authorises us to enjoy them selfishly.

Now this duty that we call the charge of souls is the foundation of the family, which falls apart through selfishness, individualism and the neglect of responsibilities.

That is why the first article of our rules reads: “The aim of the Association is the devotedness of the ruling class to the working class”, that is to say, of all superiors to inferiors, of the rich to the poor, of the master to the servants, of the employer to the workers, of those who have any influence at all to all those whom their influence can reach for good.

And as such an idea needs institutions to embody it, we have formed associations in every class.

First of all the *Committee*, a practical school of devotedness to the people for the men of the well-to-do class. Our committees are an end and not merely a means: in calling upon men of leisure, of fortune, of leading position, that is to say, social authorities, we invite them to fulfil a duty that is necessary for their own salvation, the duty of the charge of souls.

We gather the ladies in associations of *lady patronesses*, so as to employ their devotedness in the *works of resurrection*. By this name we mean the popular organisations that strike from hearts the spark of devotedness and sacrifice; for the workers too are called to win souls, and in the world of labour our associations of men, of young men, of mothers of families and of young women are organised for this purpose.

Finally, our Catholic Association of French Youth has gathered the Christian young, whom we seek to set on fire with the noble passions of honour, of the Church, of the fatherland and of the family.

By thus making each member of the family, in every class, practise devotedness, we have restored to this divine institution, the

foundation of society, the union, the strength and the power that it had lost through the neglect of responsibilities.

III

In the world of labour, we have prepared the elements of reform by successively grouping the industrialists, the engineers, the farmers, the employers in the arts and crafts and the workshop mistresses, and by organising within the working class the workshop delegates who devote themselves to the salvation of their comrades. Our industrial commission numbers eight to nine hundred members. Factories have begun to practise our methods in Marseille, Saint-Chamond, Lisieux, Douai, Armentières, Lille, Roubaix, Tourcoing, Orléans, Angers, etc.

In more than seventy factories, the wonders of Val-des-Bois have been accomplished or have begun, and everything leads us to hope that the movement will gather still more speed after our magnificent pilgrimage to Rome.

Our methods rest on the action of the workers, inspired by the employer, who is more concerned with calling forth initiatives than with doing things himself.

In our relations with our workers, we strive to imitate God by the discretion of our influence, by respect for freedom, by the real association of every will in the work of social regeneration, yet without ever ceasing to take an interest in everything.

We hold that sacrifice has its attractions, that it is the truly fruitful work. In calling those around us to it by a free and generous impulse, we pay homage to the dignity of souls created in the image of God and redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ.

In the veins of the Christian people there is the blood of the martyrs; it is found there again as soon as they are called to great and noble undertakings.

It is through generous souls, we might say heroic souls, that we are preparing the moral resurrection of labour.

IV

What is the crowning of this threefold effort on minds, on the family and on labour? It is the *corporation*.

The corporation is a professional and economic union of employers and workers on a Christian basis. This union restores justice and mutual help by putting an end to the deadly isolation in which the worker struggles. Every day, in our dealings with popular groups, we observe in every part of France the countless evils born of the pagan individualism that has invaded our country. Yes, gentlemen, the fatherland suffers because the worker is abandoned.

The anathema *Væ soli*, woe to the man who is alone, falls on him, the worker, doubly, both because he is a man and because he is a labourer. The worker is a double weakness, for whom the ordinary supports are not enough; he also needs the professional family.

This system of isolation has brought about a disorganisation of labour that has produced universal injustice: that is the fact. I shall add, gentlemen, necessary injustice; and by what name should we brand this kind of obligation?

From the general point of view, the producing class is crushed by the collapse of prices, while the consumers continue to suffer the unending rise in the cost of living.

Capital, turning against the labour that begot it, ruins the producers through the violent shocks of unbridled speculation, in which the fortune of the honest man who has worked all his life becomes the prey of those abominable games that a Christian society must not tolerate. Can the worker find justice in a society where professional ability is no longer recognised, where reasonable advancement has been replaced by violent climbing, where the struggle for life has become an economic dogma, where deadly conflicts between employ-

ers and workers are organised and encouraged by those at the head of the nation?

Can the employer find justice in a society where, separated from his workers by gulfs of distrust and hatred, he is obliged to struggle in isolation, where, in short, the need to live forces him to follow the torrent of selfishness and cowardice that is sweeping our society along?

Can the Christian employer carry out his duties of social paternity, overburdened by ceaseless toil, without security, and with the great number of workers that the necessities of modern industry impose? We do not fear to answer: No, unless he first establishes the organisation of labour by means of associations and of the corporation.

Can justice exist in the isolation that makes the heads of firms the victims of unfair, shameless competition, which ruins the industry of a country for the illegitimate profits of a few days? After me, the deluge; once my fortune is made, I retire, and so much the worse for those who are ruined: such is the common maxim.

Can consumers find justice in a society where the laws are powerless to protect them against adulteration, which reaches even into food, where no article has the quality and value attributed to it by advertisements that are organised lying?

At a meeting of architects in Paris, it was acknowledged that it would no longer be possible to build solid and honestly made houses as long as the corporation has not been established through the courage of the first men who undertake this great work at their own risk and peril.

Until then, we shall remain in injustice; and as a society practically founded on injustice is destined to perish miserably, we do not hesitate to proclaim it: since the corporation is the only means of bringing justice back into the world of labour, either the corporation will be established, or society will perish.

Our Association is the only one that is working in a practical way to solve this grave problem; that is why we appeal to all men of good will, to the help of all who care for souls and for the fatherland. Let them come with us and help us to rebuild the social edifice of labour.

It will be objected that in several places our effort has not yet been considerable, that it has been limited to various scattered groups, of little importance, whose connection cannot be seen.

But if you go to a building site where a great edifice is to be raised, what do you see after several months, sometimes several years? Foundations level with the ground, whose mass looks hardly any different from the surrounding soil, scattered stones, heaps of materials, everything in disorder. If you say to the architect: “I see nothing, you have done nothing”, he will answer you: “I have not wasted my time; I have dug very deep foundations and gathered stones in them in quantity enough to build an edifice; you see nothing, but I have obtained a base without which I can raise nothing solid. I went to fetch at great cost these stones that you see; they have been sawn and cut with great effort. Now everything is ready, and you will see the edifice rise quickly.”

So it is with our Association. We have not wasted our time; we have prepared the materials.

Last week, in a neighbouring town, we laid the foundations of a weavers’ corporation. Why were we able to do it in a few hours? Because the circle provided us with Christian workers of the trade; the Committee gave us men long trained in devotedness; the industrial commission enabled us to gather employers who have learned their duties during the several years they have been with us.

Could we have begun without all these preparatory groups? A thousand times no.

The establishment of free and voluntary corporations will lead us to the corporative system. By this we mean a social organisation in which free corporations will be recognised and favoured by the law,

and in which the representation of real interests by the delegates of the corporations will replace the representation of political passions.

Allow me, gentlemen, to sketch for you a brief picture of a fully developed corporation. For the courageous men who have made a beginning here, at the Croix-Rousse and in the building trade, it will be a foretaste of their future.

In the North, people still point out the old houses of the corporations, with their artistic gables and their elegant forms. The heart thrills with emotion on visiting these dwellings where our fathers had established the seat of professional honour and of the prosperity of the country. Our corporations, too, will each have their house, which we mean to call the *People's House*.

The house of God will be there first of all. For God will be master there, because He alone gives a people justice and charity. It is in the chapel of the corporation that the syndics will swear to be faithful to their mission. There the members of the professional family, employers and workers, will gather, in equality before God and in mutual love for God.

Next to it, the *People's Secretariat*, intended to be of service not only to the members but also to all workers in need, whatever their opinions and their conduct. The People's Secretariat, already begun in several of our foundations, is the embodiment of this idea: that wherever God reigns, one's neighbour is loved and helped. For this purpose we do not give money, but free consultations with doctors, lawyers, notaries, etc., information, and if need be letters and steps taken to make it easier to benefit from all the charitable works existing in the town. *Only* the Christian worker can bring someone to the *People's Secretariat*. In this way we want the Christian worker to become the benefactor of the working people of his neighbourhood.

Then come the economic institutions reserved for the members of the corporation. The periodic meetings of the mothers of families keep the housewives informed about the organisations they are to

use, and their council tells the delegates in charge of these institutions the *desiderata* and, if need be, the remarks of those concerned.

Further on, the *professional* institutions, everything to do with apprenticeship and vocational training; the meeting rooms for the syndics, for the various councils that deal with labour and study the means of increasing the prosperity of the trade;

Conciliation boards, where employers, meeting with the workers on common ground, discuss their interests and clear up misunderstandings; if need be, a court of arbitration, where the judges are moved by the desire for peace and concord, puts an end to the disputes, hatreds and mistrust of minds that God made for love and union.

On the other side, the *provident* institutions, whether for the investment of savings, so as to avoid those disasters that plunge thrifty families into poverty, or to encourage and assist deposits.

The present corporations have already furnished this material proof: through Christian association, which moderates desires and teaches simplicity, the source of wealth, and through economic institutions, which lead to payment in cash, we have obtained savings so considerable that they seem impossible for populations that have not practised our methods. We may cite, for example, for six hundred workers, savings of more than sixty thousand francs every year, with very ordinary wages and with the high cost of living, alas! so common today. The fact is that the Christian corporation has already worked miracles in the field of saving, as in the religious field, as in the professional field.

The section of provident institutions also organises pensions for old age, compensation for accidents, and assistance for widows and their children.

The corporation, today as in former times, has a special tenderness for families deprived of their head, their breadwinner and their guide.

Services of mutual charity are set up, a thousand times more precious and more fruitful than help in money, necessary as that is.

Our present corporations have transformed surroundings consumed by jealousy among equals and by hatred of superiors into true paradises, where love flows among equals and rushes towards the head of the professional family, who becomes a father, not only by his functions but also by name. Thus God, who loves the Franks, while He has permitted the disgraces and downfalls of the systems from which He is banished, has chosen to multiply economic miracles and miracles of social peace wherever people have relied on Him, wherever the mutual devotedness of heads and workers has been called forth.

Is all this possible everywhere? Can this ideal be realised in Lyon? Yes, gentlemen, with faith and perseverance.

Faith teaches us that nations can be healed, that every undertaking necessary for the salvation of souls is willed by God. Faith tells us so: when one relies on God and not on man, success is certain. We do not fear to proclaim it aloud in the midst of this assembly: those Christians who hesitate to undertake the *corporation* because they fear they will draw no success from their effort, those Christians insult God and commit a kind of blasphemy.

The word may seem to you more oratorical than accurate; but no, if you pay heed to two things: the first, that the corporation, the only remedy for the relentless evil of the worker's isolation, is necessary to a dying society; the second, that God, powerful and good, could not stint His help to a work of social salvation. Your doubt, your hesitations, what more shall I say? your faint-heartedness would contradict your faith in His justice.

Ah! gentlemen, in the first centuries of our era, when Christian blood flowed in torrents, when the wise men of our day would have thought all was lost, the catacombs rang only with hymns of hope and thanksgiving. Is it of you, sons of St Pothinus, of St Blandina

and of the most illustrious martyrs of Gaul, victorious through blood and death; is it of you that we must ask not to doubt the power of God?

No, a thousand times no; and I want to believe that the noble motto of our fathers will find its application here: *Gesta Dei per Francos*.

The miracles of God will be renewed here as elsewhere. The courageous action of the people of Lyon will undertake everything. Remember that you are the sons of Our Lady of Fourvière, who cries out to you from the top of the hill: Save my children, I am with you!

THE END