

LÉON HARMEL

THE CHURCH AND COMMERCE

SPEECH DELIVERED

ON 27 JUNE 1897

AT THE ANNUAL CONGRESS OF THE FRATERNAL UNION



PARIS

FORMERLY GAUME & CO.

X. RONDELET & CO., PUBLISHERS

3, RUE DE L'ABBAYE, 3

All rights reserved.

THIS EDITION

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 1897 edition. It has been typeset in the spirit of the original: title pages and headings follow the layout of the book.

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

leonharmel.com

Translated from the transcription of the copy digitised by the Bibliothèque de la KU Leuven (Google Livres). Google Livres, exemplaire de la KU Leuven.

Original document: <https://books.google.fr/books?id=GjZzVB6ufN0C>

Version of 4 October 2026.

THE FRATERNAL UNION

CONSECRATION OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY
TO THE SACRED HEART
IN THE BASILICA OF MONTMARTRE
27 JUNE 1897

SPEECH BY MR LÉON HARMEL
ON THE CHURCH AND COMMERCE

Dear Sirs,

Our first word is always a word of gratitude.

Glory to Jesus Christ, our Master and our King!

It is through Him that all good things come to us. It is through Him that we are united, and that we have for one another a truly brotherly affection.

A great act has been accomplished in these last months. A memorandum has been sent to the French episcopate by Christian commerce¹. You have thus taken up again our old national traditions. It is from this act that I draw my inspiration in speaking to you today. I wish to say a few words to you about what the Church has done for commerce and what commerce has lost by drawing away from the Church.

1. See the text of this memorandum in the *Bulletin de l'Union fraternelle* of June 1897.

I.

WHAT THE CHURCH HAS DONE FOR COMMERCE

Pagan antiquity professed for commerce the same contempt as for manual labour. Cicero, in whom the philosophy of his time seems to be summed up, regarded trade as unworthy of a free man. Besides, does not the very fact of having given commerce, as its type and its protector, a thieving god, Mercury, tell us enough about the state of minds?

The Church, in restoring the nobility and dignity of manual labour, also wished to give back to commerce its honour and its necessary place in society. It is commerce, indeed, that gives the worker his living, by making it easier to sell what he produces, and by putting within everyone's reach the things needed for food, for clothing, for all the needs of life. Can one conceive of a society without exchange?

On this ground, the Church declared commerce legitimate because of the benefit that society draws from it. She favoured it and developed it; one may say that in France especially she created it. It was through pilgrimages that the great periodic markets were established, where the provinces, and even whole peoples, went to supply themselves with all things. These same pilgrimages gave rise to the roads that make transport easy. It was for the protection of pilgrims and merchants that hermits set up ferries at river crossings. The Popes, at the time of the Crusades, attached to the building of bridges and roads the same indulgences as to visiting the Holy Places. Thanks to these roads, built under the impulse of the Church, producers, brought closer to one another, were able to learn of and attend the markets, which are the essential condition for easy transactions.

The Church made laws to give security to traders. The Truce of God set a barrier to the depredations of the warlike. Chivalry had as its first mission to protect the pilgrim and the traveller, that is to say the trader. It was thanks to the Teutonic Order that the famous commercial confederation called the Hanseatic League became so powerful and so prosperous.

But the Church did not wish to be a guardian for ever; she wanted labour and commerce to be strong enough to defend themselves, and that is why she called into being those marvellous associations known as the guilds.

The organisation of labour: that is indeed the solution of the social question in every field of human activity. Now this organisation was admirably devised to regulate production, to limit competition, to prevent combinations and the formation of powerful firms that swallow up the market. At the same time, it ensured justice to consumers as well as to sellers. It is the masterpiece of the Christian spirit.

Mankind has always been the same, that is to say inclined to injustice, and it is wonderful to study the rules inspired by the Church for the respect of mutual rights. "To do good and honest work" was a law laid down in all the statutes. Thus in Antwerp locksmiths were forbidden to make a key without having the lock in their hands; butchers were forbidden to blow up meat or to mix it with other substances (lard); weavers were forbidden to make cloth with wool supplied by usurers, because that wool might have been deposited as security for a debt. The master had to work in broad daylight, under the eyes of the public. The goldsmith and the locksmith had to have their forges in their shops; the tailor had to sew, the buckle maker had to turn or file his copper at the workbench, near the ground-floor window; hence the prohibition of night work, at least for the trades that called for attention and delicacy.

Selling too was subject to strict vigilance. Masters were forbidden to combine to raise the price of goods. "Good weight and good meas-

ure” was the rule (measures and weights must everywhere be equal and just, Council of Arles, 813). Frequent and unexpected inspections left little room for fraud. And these men, who were just because they were Christians, and who enjoyed legal personality, that is to say judged themselves, these men were merciless towards bad manufacturers and dishonest sellers. Such customs, observed for a long time, earned our France her universal reputation for honesty and skill.

Having protected the buyer, the Church protected the seller against dishonest competition. Thus the regulations forbade members to harm one another by calling out to customers from afar, by luring them away from a neighbour’s shop, or by offering their services while the customer was bargaining with another; and they forbade craftsmen to combine in order to bring down other traders.

In this way the seller kept the customers who trusted him, and did not fear falling victim to the shady schemes of an unscrupulous competitor. It was the safeguard of the supplier and of the consumer.

There were also laws protecting against internal monopoly. People have often complained of the obstacles placed in the way of freedom of trade by the regulations of the guilds. I readily grant that our customs would no longer bear these *impedimenta*; yet we must not forget that it was thanks to these measures that the commerce of that time escaped the plague denounced by Leo XIII: the monopolisation of capital and of goods, and also the plague of the department stores, which will kill small commerce before long if we do not take care.

Finally, commerce had to defend itself against stock-jobbing and usury. You know what the Church did in this respect. She first fought energetically against the debasement of metal coinage, which was so favourable to commercial transactions. She combated Jewish usury with great persistence. The invasion of the Jews goes back to the first centuries of Christianity. In the seventh century, history shows them filling the small towns of the interior and ruining them by

usury^{*}.

The chronicles, the legends, the charters, the royal ordinances echo the public indignation.

And so the Church thundered against usury through the voice of the Fathers, the theologians and the councils.

In 850 the Council of Pavia ordered usurers to restore what they had acquired by usury, and if they had not done so in their lifetime, their heirs were to do it after their death.

The Council of Avignon (1209) says: “All usurers in general shall be excommunicated at the sermons of Sundays and feast days... The Jews shall be compelled to restore to Christians what they have exacted from them by usury.”

When the law of the Church no longer sufficed to protect commerce, she acted herself. She founded the banks and credit institutions known as the banks of St George, in Venice, in 1156.

The Jews seized these institutions and corrupted them by introducing usury^{*}: to the usurious banks the Church opposed the *monti di pietà*. The first was founded in Perugia (15th century) by a Recollect friar; they soon spread everywhere.

In the Middle Ages, while the Jews practised usury^{*}, the Lombards introduced stock-jobbing and speculation, less skilful perhaps

^{*} **NOTE** In this speech (p. 7, 9 and 11), Léon Harmel repeats accusations against the Jews that were common at the time: usury, hidden control of capital, the invention of the joint-stock company. In the Middle Ages the Church forbade Christians to lend at interest, and the Jews, kept out of most trades, were often confined to dealing in money: hence the image of the Jewish usurer. This language, fed by the success of Édouard Drumont's *La France juive* (1886) and by the Panama scandal (1892), was then widespread in a large part of the French press and of French Catholic circles, in the years of the Dreyfus affair, 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 fidelity to the document: they belong to their time, and this edition does not make them its own.

than in our day, but bold and ruinous. History tells us that they lent money to our kings for the Crusades, but while the crusaders were fighting, they were dealing and betraying us through shameful trafficking with the enemy. They even succeeded in giving Christians a thirst for gold. This habit of speculation was one of the chief solvents of Christian society; the luxury and elegance of the Italians established themselves on the ruins of chivalry and of the old beliefs.

II.

WHAT COMMERCE HAS LOST BY DRAWING AWAY FROM THE CHURCH

Commerce was torn from the arms of the Church, and its upbringing was entrusted to the lawyers. They put Roman law in the place of Christian law, and the doctrine of the struggle for life replaced the “Love one another”.

From Philip the Fair onwards, we see the guilds fighting one another to crush each other; the ever more rigorous demands of the royal treasury cause craftsmen and sellers to abandon their austere morality a little more each day; they come to terms with the court; venality corrupts everything, and complaints arise from all sides against a commerce that was once so upright.

New doctors arrive: those of orthodox political economy: *laissez faire, laissez passer*. Instead of reforming abuses, they found it simpler to abolish everything, and since that time we have been in anarchy.

ANONYMITY

Allow me to say a word about anonymity, which seems to us the greatest danger of the present day.

The masterpiece of the Jewish genius is the joint-stock company, whose genesis is as follows*.

Since the dispersion, the aim of the Jews and of the Judaisers who have entered their pay has been this: the *hidden* concentration of capital, the source of all power in the world. Until the nineteenth century, the Jewish tribe had come up against a difficulty that seemed insurmountable. Capital in its various forms could be touched and verified: heads of cattle, land, commercial trade, workshops, factories. A Jew had the good fortune to give shelter to a man of his race, of satanic genius, who has left a certain name: Saint-Simon. The Portuguese Jewish tribe made the poor relation rack his brains, and out of them sprang, fully armed, the conception of the joint-stock company*.

This form of company consists, as we know, in the constitution of a normal body in which the capital, divided into uniform parts, or shares, is alone liable for the company's commitments. The shareholders are not known. They may be French or foreign without distinction. They are liable only for the amount of their shares. The directors or managers are personally liable, *in infinitum*, only in quite exceptional cases.

Isaac Péreire, the true founder of anonymity in France, greatly relished Saint-Simon's conception in principle. He nevertheless wished to try it out before spreading it. The first trial was the railway from Paris to Saint-Germain. Later, the Louvre anonymously centralised another part of commercial wealth. But one difficulty remained: the land.

It did not seem possible to mobilise and volatilise this compact mass on which everything rests. With the mortgage made general by the Crédit foncier, the trick was found. From then on, between the

* NOTE See the note on page 7.

apparent owner and the land itself there arises a third party: the anonymous mortgage creditor, who detaches the value of the soil and carries it beyond the frontiers, sometimes to enemies.

Bismarck in the past, and more recently the Berlin bank that follows his traditions, have taken advantage of the anonymous form to try to seize the great commercial and industrial instruments of our country, which it could thus denationalise economically.

It is enough to buy on the Stock Exchange shares of the land companies and of the great transport companies, and then to direct them, under the veil of anonymity, according to the interests of the nation. We cannot cite the most serious facts from the point of view of national security, because we might expose ourselves to legal proceedings that we must avoid.

The great danger of anonymity is not only the denationalisation of a country; it is not only the hidden organisation of an unknown power that tomorrow may absorb everything. It is also, and above all, the true stepping stone to State communism, in which all the liberties that come to us from Christ would definitively founder.

Péreire did not stop there. He began the organism that is, as it were, the synthesis of all anonymities and that he had ambitiously called the *Omnium*. All the joint-stock companies have founded one that sums them up and is in charge of paying the coupons or collecting the dividends. The fall of the French Crédit mobilier, created by Péreire, brought the whole system crashing down. But the danger threatens us again before long.

SMALL COMMERCE

In small commerce, the old customs held firm for a certain time, and lent an appearance of order to the real disorder that existed in ideas and no longer met with any check in practice.

But from the complaints that are rising on all sides, from the sorrowful demands that are being heard, we must indeed recognise that

the number of victims is growing every day.

The gladiators of old, fascinated by the power of Caesar, went to their death without complaint, and as they passed before the imperial box they saluted the tyrant with these words: *Morituri te salutant*.

In the same way, for a long time the victims of the individualist system, fascinated by modern science, saluted false economic liberty as a higher divinity, and disappeared one after another into the abyss without complaint.

But at last this time of servitude is past. The false dogmas of '89 are seen through by every school. We realise that this false liberty, full of promises, was only a snare. As long as there are wolves and sheep, the sheep will be eaten by the wolves if there is no barrier. As long as there are Jews and Judaisers, the multitude of Christians will be despoiled and reduced to destitution*.

Small commerce is condemned to death by the brutal law of the struggle for life, which results in the crushing of the weak by the strong. And now an immense clamour rises from every point of the horizon: "Enough of false liberty, we want justice."

The common substance must no longer be absorbed by a few alone. We want everyone to live, the small as well as the great. Present-day society is divided into two parts: the powerful, who claim to have all rights without duties, and the weak, on whom it is sought to impose all duties without rights.

We want the rights of the humble to be respected like those of the strong; study and experience have convinced us that error and falsehood have engendered all the present catastrophes. We therefore want to find again the truth that sets free.

That is why we shall go to Leo XIII, to the source of all truth, to Him who will be the righter of wrongs and the liberator of commerce, as he has been of industry.

* NOTE See the note on page 7.

III.

WHAT MUST WE DO?

How can we struggle at present against the abuses of every kind that oppress us? One may distinguish individual action for the restoration of Christian practices, collective action to prepare better legislation, and finally teaching, which brings about the transformation of minds while waiting for it to achieve the reform of institutions.

Our fathers bequeathed to us two words that are still used, but whose Christian meaning is no longer understood: the words *client* and *confrère*.

Client means protégé.

The doctor saves the life of a sick man; the lawyer spares an accused man prison; the notary, by his care, manages to secure an endangered inheritance: so many services rendered to clients, that is to say to the protégés of the doctor, the lawyer, the notary. What a fine expression when it is applied to the buyer! He is the protégé of the seller, so he has no need to know the goods, to study their market price, to check their weight. He can trust the seller to watch over his interests. He is the client, that is to say the protégé.

When I entered business, I knew traders who still practised these customs of another age. One of them said to me: “Before concluding a bargain, I consider whether my client is to make a profit from it; I would rather give up a deal than conclude one in which the client cannot make a gain after me.”

The second word that the Christian centuries bequeathed to us is *confrère*, which applied to men of the same profession, to those whom we call competitors today. The guild made them true brothers, who recognised that they had the same interests, the same right to live. They helped one another through joint purchasing and through a

thousand services that assured each of them a security and a prosperity unknown today.

From these two practices came trust, the true driving soul of business.

Buyers. — The Church has declared that buyers, too, have duties. She teaches that the circulation of money always has a moral bearing.

When the enemy was trampling our eastern provinces, he levied forced taxes in our communes. Now in ours, we were able, through the trust of our fellow citizens, to obtain the refusal of any payment. The municipal council braved a thousand dangers. The fine, which it had to pay *after the armistice*, remains a claim to glory for our village. Now by what arguments did we bring about this resistance? By saying: “This money will be turned into bullets that will kill our brothers. It is better to risk the plundering of the village than to contribute to the death of our brothers.” And our valiant people exposed themselves to ruin.

Well then! What happened from the political point of view happens every day from the economic point of view. The Freemason and his protégé, the German Jew, levy contributions on the purses of Catholics, and the money paid to them is turned into bullets that strike our priests, our nuns and our children^{*}.

From the collective point of view, the first grouping is that of the Fraternal Union, in which we would like to bring together a considerable number of employers and traders, in order to have a respectable basis for our general demands. To judge the usefulness of the *Annuaire* only by the increase in sales that each can draw from it is to mistake the great idea that has guided us.

We have sought to achieve three aims. First of all, to group Christians who are in business under the standard of Jesus Christ; for He

^{*} **NOTE** See the note on page 7.

alone can make men practise justice, as He alone multiplies bread, that is to say material prosperity.

Our second aim is to create a social force, powerful through its numbers and its community of feeling, so as to make the legitimate demands concerning the trade licence tax and everything that concerns our affairs prevail before Parliament.

Finally, we want to reform commercial customs, to accustom Christian employers to buy from Christian employers. We shall only achieve this with time.

But let us say it aloud: the *Annuaire*, whose seventh year we are preparing, is a work of capital importance. You must all become its apostles. We shall appear at the beginning of January 1898, and, the following year, we shall bring the date forward by another month so as to appear in December. We must make this volume popular, so that it is in everyone's hands for their purchases.

Finally, as we said above, the disorders of which we are the witnesses and the victims have their sources in the errors that poison the minds of our contemporaries.

Serious philosophers unanimously recognise that the Gospel is the only source of justice, that it alone can give man the strength to fulfil the duties that become the source of his rights. How can we think of rebuilding a society in conformity with the Gospel without asking the Vicar of Jesus Christ for its plan?

We shall therefore go to him, we shall ask for his guidance on commerce, stock-jobbing and cornering, as he has given it on industry.

Be assured of it, dear Sirs, the word of the Pope will be a light for the whole world on subjects that are disputed because of the darkening of minds and the perversity of men. When we see clearly, we shall be able to act with confidence, and we shall work with an energy full of hope to re-establish a Christian society.

Let us go, then, to Rome.

The old man in white awaits us.

From the heights of the Vatican! his prophet's eye pierces through time and space! A stranger to the disputes of this world, he has an understanding of the needs of the peoples.

His tender affection for France is deeply touching. We must answer it with our filial devotedness and our submission.

Let us set out in great numbers².

We shall come back consoled and encouraged, saying to ourselves: "Our worries have given way to confidence; the Papacy saved the world in past centuries, and it is the Papacy again that will save the society of the nineteenth century by re-establishing among men the reign of justice and love."

2. The France du Travail (Labour France) in Rome, an annual pilgrimage whose departures take place this year on 2 August (Paris), 3 August (Marseilles), 5 August (Lyons). Secretary of the pilgrimage: Mr François Champion, at Val-des-Bois (Marne).