

ASSOCIATION OF CATHOLIC WORKERS' CIRCLES

SUMMARY ACCOUNT

OF THE ASSOCIATION

Address by Mr Léon HARMEL

delivered at Lyon on 27 November 1887

"The Association of Catholic Workers'

Circles is worthy of all praise,

and We can only highly approve

the thought which inspired you

to create it."

(Address of H. H. Leo XIII, 23 Feb. 1885.)



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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.

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

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Your Grace¹,
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 aim, its action, its means: these are subjects always useful to study; for, despite an existence of sixteen years, we are still little understood by those around us.

We must admit that our name has lent itself to misunderstanding. The name *Catholic Workers' Circles* calls to mind a conception quite different from ours. But, at the time of our beginnings, the Circle was the only means by which our Associations could obtain the legal freedom to hold meetings.

Since the law of 1884, we would have liked to change our first name and choose one that indicated our true aim, but the wish of His Holiness led 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. — DOCTRINE.

From the point of view of doctrine, we can affirm that no society has been more submissive to the teaching of the Church, nor above all more anxious to possess the whole truth, in order 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

1. Mgr Foulon, Archbishop of Lyon, presided over the Meeting.

to the counsels of the divine wisdom 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 Parocchi, was appointed. He receives our minutes and our publications, and we undertake nothing of importance without having consulted him.

In each diocese, we ask 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, with admirable wisdom, he settled a point still debated or left obscure for Catholics. 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 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.”

Note how the Holy Father parts company with the State socialists, by basing the necessity of the intervention of the authorities not on *reason of State*, but on the observation that the higher goods of humanity, morality, justice, human dignity and the domestic life of the worker, are threatened or compromised.

Note on the other hand how he parts company with that *absolute liberalism* according to which individual initiative should always be enough to safeguard these higher goods, which are at one and the same time 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, to submit to it our faith and our Christian action.

To spread our ideas, we have a weekly newspaper, *la Corporation*; a monthly review, *l'Association*; a Catholic press union, in which we have been able to bring together, on Christian social ground, journalists belonging to different political shades; 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 19th century as in the centuries before it.

II. — FAMILY

To enter into action, we had first of all to work 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 to us that we can rebuild this social unit only by grouping each of its members, the fathers, the mothers,

the children, according both to their ages and to their situations, in different associations, true schools in which the education of individuals is remade.

As each of them brings back to the home the spirit of devotedness and responsibility drawn from our works through the practice of social duties, we save 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 specially and solely.

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 must carry out the apostolate; He lays 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 either in some sense official, that is to say proceeding from a positive order, or else it belongs to 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, position, education, intelligence, wealth*, imposes duties towards those below. All these advantages are given to us for the good of others, and God never allows us to enjoy them selfishly.

Now, this duty, which 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 rule is this: "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 man to the poor, of the master to his servant, of the employer to his worker, of those who have any influence whatever to all whom their influence can reach for good.

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

First of all the *Committee*, a school in which the men of the comfortable class put devotedness to the people into practice. 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 necessary for their own salvation, the duty of the charge of souls.

We group the ladies in the *Associations of lady patronesses*, 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 girls are organised for this aim.

Finally, our *Catholic Association of French Youth* has brought together Christian youth, whom we seek to fire with the noble passions of the Church, of the fatherland and of the family.

By thus making each member of the family practise devotedness, in every class, we have restored to this divine institution, the foundation of society, the union, strength and power it had lost through the neglect of responsibilities.

III. — LABOUR

In the world of labour, we have prepared the elements of reform by grouping in turn the industrialists, the engineers, the farmers, the employers in arts and crafts and the workshop mistresses, and by organising in 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, Douai, Armentières, Lille, Roubaix, Tourcoing, Orléans, Angers, Cousances, 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, while never ceasing to take an interest in everything.

We hold that sacrifice has its attractions, that it is truly fruitful work. By calling those around us to it through 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 martyrs; it shows itself again as soon as the people 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. — CORPORATION

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 relations 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 doubly on the worker, both because he is a man and because he is a labourer. The worker is a twofold 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 which has produced universal injustice; I will add, necessary injustice. And by what name are we to brand this kind of compulsion?

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

Capital, turning against the labour that gave birth to it, ruins the producers through the violent upheavals 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 rational advancement is replaced by violent scrambling, where the struggle for life has become an economic dogma, where deadly struggles between employers and workers are organised and encouraged by those at the head of the nation?

Can the employer find justice when, separated from his workers by chasms of mistrust and hatred, he is obliged to struggle in isolation, when, 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 practise his duties of social paternity, overworked by unrelenting toil, without security, and with the large number of workers that the necessities of modern industry impose? We do not fear to answer: No, unless he first of all establishes the organisation of labour by means of associations and 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, too bad 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 ascribed to it by advertisements that are organised lying?

At a meeting of architects in Paris, it was observed that it would no longer be possible to build truly solid and honestly made houses until the corporation is established through the courage of those who undertake this great work at their own risk and peril.

Until then, we shall remain in injustice; and since a society founded in practice on injustice is destined to perish miserably, we do not hesitate to proclaim it: the corporation being 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 practice 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 with no visible link between them.

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 soil around, 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 piled up in them stones 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 at great expense to fetch these stones you see; they have been sawn and cut with great effort. Now everything is ready, and you are going to 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 supplied us with Christian workers of the trade; the committee gave us men long trained in devotedness; the industrial commission enabled us to bring together employers who have learned their duties over 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 the corporations will be recognised and favoured by law, and in which the representation of real interests by the delegates of the corporations will replace the representation of political passions.

V. — HOUSE OF THE PEOPLE

Allow me, gentlemen, to sketch for you a rapid picture of a completed corporation. It will give the courageous men who have made a start here, at the Croix-Rousse and in the building trade, a foretaste of their future.

In the North, the old houses of the guilds are still shown, with their artistic gables and their elegant forms. The heart thrills with emotion when one visits these dwellings in which 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 wish to call the *House of the People*.

God will be the 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.

Beside it, the *People's Secretariat*, intended to render service not only to the members but also to all working people in need, whatever their sentiments and their conduct. The people's secretariat, already begun in several of our foundations, is the embodiment of the idea that wherever God reigns, one's neighbour is loved and helped. For this we give no money, but free consultations with doctors, lawyers, notaries, etc., information and, where needed, letters and representations to make it easier to benefit from all the charitable works existing in the town. *Only* the Christian worker can bring people 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 the *Economic Institutions*, reserved for the members of the corporation. The periodical 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 *de-siderata* and, if need be, the comments of those concerned.

Further on, the *Professional Institutions*, everything that concerns 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 disputes, hatreds and mistrust among 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 catastrophes 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 the 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 mention, for example, for six hundred workers, savings of more than sixty thousand francs each year, with very ordinary wages and a high cost of living, alas, very common today. The fact is that the Christian corporation has already worked miracles in the field of saving, as in the religious field and in the professional field.

The section of provident institutions also organises old-age pensions, compensation for accidents, and assistance to 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 established, a thousand times more precious and more fruitful than help in money, necessary though that

is.

Our present corporations have transformed surroundings devoured by jealousy among equals and by hatred of superiors into true paradises, where love circulates among equals and rises up to the head of the professional family, who becomes a father not only by his functions but even by name. Thus God, who loves the Franks, while He has permitted the disgrace and the downfall of the systems from which He is banished, has chosen to multiply economic miracles and miracles of social peace wherever men have relied on Him and have called forth the mutual devotedness of the heads and the workers.

VI. — CONCLUSION

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

Faith teaches us that nations are curable, that every undertaking necessary for the salvation of souls is willed by God. Faith tells us that 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: Christians who hesitate to undertake the *corporation* because they fear they will not draw some success from their effort, such Christians insult God and commit a kind of blasphemy.

The word may seem to you more oratorical than accurate, but you will find it just if you pay heed to two things: first, that the corporation, the only remedy for the relentless evil of the worker's isolation, is necessary to a society that is dying; second, that God, powerful and good, cannot 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 was flowing in streams, when the wise men of our day would have thought all hope 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 wish 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 is going to 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!

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