

Etudes sociales

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GEORGES LEGRAND

A prodigious moving spirit of the

Catholic social movement

LÉON HARMEL

“THE GOOD FATHER”

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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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GEORGES LEGRAND

*A prodigious moving spirit of the
Catholic social movement*

Léon HARMEL

“THE GOOD FATHER”

A prodigious moving spirit of the Catholic social movement

Léon Harmel

“THE GOOD FATHER”

In sociology, as in the other fields of human thought and activity, there are what Emerson calls “representative men”, that is to say powerful personalities in whom a whole movement of doctrines and works appears in miniature: Léon Harmel is one of these men. It is to him that we should like, in the aftermath of the centenary of his birth, to devote these few pages, in which we shall endeavour to sum up the admirable, definitive biography, as captivating as it is beneficial, that the Rev. Fr Guitton has recently given us².

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Let us first make the acquaintance of the inner man.

Before studying the ideas dear to Harmel, the initiatives he took, the works in which he had a part, all that outward action which was prodigious, let us try to grasp the distinctive features of this countenance: intelligence, heart, character, temperament, aspirations and concerns, which form the fabric of this life, seen not from without but from within.

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1. This study was given as a lecture in several Belgian towns on the occasion of Harmel’s centenary.

2. Two volumes, Spes, Paris, 1928. Earlier, the Rev. Fr Guitton had sketched Harmel’s features and career in **Portraits de catholiques sociaux** (lectures given at Lille), Paris, Spes. The Rev. Fr Guitton is also the author of the highly esteemed life of Fr Lenoir.

Harmel was by profession a great spinner, born of a family devoted generation after generation to industry, which, after a period of thankless toil, settled at Val-des-Bois, not far from Reims, and knew lasting prosperity there.

At first hesitating between the attraction of a priestly vocation and the call of a lay apostolate, after praying and taking counsel he chose the world, married, knew nine times the happiness of fatherhood, and saw his admirable wife die when he was reaching forty; then, with a sublime impulse, his soul serene and his heart crushed, he devoted himself from that time on, with untiring energy and with a zest that the years themselves could not slacken, on the one hand to his children and grandchildren, to his brothers, to his old father, to his workers and the families of his workers, and on the other hand to the Church, to the drawing together of the classes, to the moral and material uplifting of the multitude. Thus he spent himself unsparingly, body and soul, until the age of 86; among the countless undertakings he supported, of which he was the moving spirit, he liked to name three: the workers' pilgrimages to Rome, the congresses of the Franciscan Third Order and the workers' congresses.

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In this irresistible zest there was a good measure of natural optimism. An optimist by reason and an optimist by instinct, Harmel was both; reasoning, and still more the spirit of faith, only strengthened a fundamental tendency.

He had been granted an uncommon physical vigour, exceptional in the words of his doctor; through the many cruel trials that struck him, his health never failed. Heredity and the examples he had received at home had disposed him to joyful action. And so he could declare to the collaborators he wore out: "I do not know what fatigue is." He was forever saying that one must "climb on top of one's head and force it to walk". One of his favourite sayings was: "an obstacle is

a means rather than a hindrance". Obstacles spurred his ardour: that is the mark of the strong.

The psycho-physiologists have vied with one another in showing that activity is a source of satisfaction. If anyone relished this lesson and took it upon himself to give a living and perpetual demonstration of it, it was certainly Léon Harmel.

He loved work passionately and preached it to everyone: from this point of view he appreciated the Anglo-Saxon spirit and Americanism. The initiatives by which a Démolins tried to bring to the Continent methods of particularist education borrowed from overseas did not leave him indifferent. No doubt he would gladly have made his own Le Play's fine saying: "the aim of work is virtue, and not wealth".

But, imbued with spirituality as he was, he valued the material result of work, the profit; as an industrialist he wanted work that paid.

Like all hard-working men, he detested and despised gambling. He would have agreed entirely on this point with one of the princes of American industry, Carnegie, whose advice to young people is particularly timely in these days when speculation on the stock exchange is raging: gambling on the stock exchange or gambling in a kursaal, the one is no better than the other, or rather, socially speaking, gambling on the stock exchange is even worse than gambling at Spa, Ostend or Monaco.

Optimistic and hard-working, Harmel followed innovations with sympathy: even as an old man he took an interest in the ventures of the young; far from discouraging them or looking askance at them, he spurred them on; thus he applauded the beginnings of Marc Sangnier and the first campaigns of the *Sillon*, and withdrew his support only when Sangnier and his group took a direction that was to call down the severity of Pius X. He did not speak ill of his time, in spite of its weaknesses and its errors, because there is good in every age, and

also because one acts only in so far as one does not despair of success, and again because our time is the one in which Providence has willed us to be. In 1913 a visitor to Val-des-Bois wrote: "This is the first time I have met an old man who does not regret the past and who is enthusiastic about the present."



A type of strength, Harmel was a tender heart.

Strength and kindness were wonderfully allied in this soul, wholly evangelical, constantly concerned to conform itself more closely to the divine Model. As often happens, he lavished on others, in the most varied and ingenious forms, the generosity and compassion that he possessed in superabundance, being hard on himself and not in the habit of pitying his own miseries.

It was rightly that the title of "Good Father" was given to him, in spite of the right of the eldest, when the man on whom Val-des-Bois had first bestowed it died. The title has remained his; history has confirmed the verdict of his contemporaries: never was a title better deserved or better borne.

His native kindness, purified and enlarged by education, by the experience of life, by suffering accepted and blessed, shone out and spread at every moment, first within the circle of the family, which already numbered in 1911 seventy-four children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, then among his workers and the families of his workers gathered round the mill; and then it went far afield, everywhere, in search of friends to comfort, unhappy people to console, material and spiritual misfortunes to relieve.

One could glean at will from his biography delightful traits and touching anecdotes that show Harmel's kindness.

As an old man he could be seen every day coming out of his house, the pockets of his frock coat bulging with an enormous bag of sweets renewed daily, and, as soon as he was in the yards of the mill or of

the school next to the mill, surrounded and besieged by the children. When he was teased about it, he would ask whether anyone could point out to him a better way of making these little ones understand what kindness is. His eighty years did not prevent him from sharing the games of a whole swarm of children who ran from the cellar to the attic in grandfather's house, running about with them, turning everything upside down, shouting "the sea is rough, the sea is rough" and protesting that "nothing bores him, nothing disturbs him".

His kindness extended far beyond the family circle. The master of Val-des-Bois practised hospitality in the manner of the patriarchs. Round the family table, where twenty-five to fifty places were usually laid, there was always room for passing guests, rich or poor, great or small; the fortunate of this world, and above all the unfortunate, were welcome there. There one might see seated a Cardinal Gibbons, the famous defender of the "Knights of Labor" in the United States, or a Mgr Langénieux, of whom the diocese of Reims is rightly proud, just as well as seminarians on holiday, priests who were tired and in need of rest, or priests burdened with works and in search of alms, theorists and practitioners of sociology, professors or industrialists.

The test of kindness is opposition, contradiction, criticism, false imputations, calumny: this test was not spared Harmel; it came to him, it fell upon him, sometimes in violent storms, rising from the very ranks of those whom on principle he respected, from highly placed religious authorities. Nothing shook his confidence, his good humour remained unalterable, his ardour was not cooled by it. On the contrary, Harmel saw in all this nothing but blessings, for his person and for his industrial and social undertakings. He always practised to the letter the watchword given him at the beginning of his career by a holy and learned religious, Father Lepidi: "Be a man of action. When you are attacked, never reply." A bishop distorted his intentions, misrepresented his initiatives, attacked him publicly. Friends advised him to demand redress, if only in the interest of the works and of the

social movement of which he was the inspirer; his lawyer was ready; Harmel stopped him and chose silence. He was well qualified to admonish laymen and priests who had been bruised or embittered by painful conflicts; the letters he wrote to them overflow with resignation, better still, with Christian joy. To one of them, who complained of insulting treatment, he recalled the words of Our Lord before Pilate: "Thou wouldst have no power over me, unless it were given thee from above".

You may perhaps think that certain natures easily bear an outrage, bowing like the reed without suffering, only to rise again when the gust of wind has passed: natures inclined to accept, fatalists. But Harmel was precisely not one of those natures: all that I have said of him will already have shown you that. When one enters into Harmel's intimacy, following his biographer, and examines the notebooks in which he recorded his failings and his progress in the spiritual life, one becomes convinced that, while chastity and voluntary poverty cost him little, he acquired humility, on the contrary, only at the price of unceasing and painful efforts. The human beast he rode, to use his favourite expression, stiffened and kicked against humiliations. But Harmel became a gentle man by force of will and self-mastery; he was a peacemaker, firm with an unshakeable firmness as to principles, infinitely compassionate towards persons.

Amid the discords so harmful to French Catholics, he repeated: "Let us work to unite. Will persecution work this miracle?... The mentality of Catholics is dreadful... they spend their time tearing one another apart." He went so far as to pray for the persecutors of the Church. He who battled like a Maccabee for the triumph of Catholicism wrote: "Every day after Communion I say a special prayer for the men in government, Loubet, Combes, Rouvier, etc... St Stephen obtained a tremendous change in Paul, who became St Paul; who knows whether our modest prayers will not obtain some result too? That does not prevent us from defending our rights. We do so with

all the more intrepidity and success the less we insult our adversaries."



I have tried to give a sketch of Léon Harmel's moral countenance, but the depths of the inner man I have not yet uncovered. The hearth that animates this whole life, whose flame shines through this countenance, you have so far felt its warmth only indirectly. Scripture speaks of the "*mens cordis*", the very depths of the heart; "the heart of the heart", as Hello says: what was it in Harmel?

Harmel was a great realist, always concerned to express, to translate, to embody his thought in tangible works. But Harmel was also eminently a mystic; I mean that he had, extremely keen and constantly sustained by meditation and prayer, the sense of the supernatural, of union with God, of collaboration in the divine work in the world, which is essentially the work of the salvation of souls.

The day after his wife's death, he wrote to a friend who was a religious: "Blessed be the will of God! With the help of your good prayers, my very dear Father... we shall try to build another dwelling... but this time not only will God be there, but He will be there alone, and everything else will be there in Him and for Him; my dear children, all my family so affectionate towards me, and our great workers' family, all will be loved there in Jesus and for Jesus, while Jesus will be loved there for Himself alone. Such are the plans and the desires that the terrible trial God has sent me has caused to arise in my heart".

On the threshold of his eighty-second year, looking back over the past, he would say: "The apostolate was visibly the way that God imposed on me. To draw me into it, He made me succeed in the most daring undertakings, I would even say the most reckless".

"Clearly," he added, "the Sacred Heart alone has acted. I tried to slip away. There were two men in me, one who was willing, the other

who was not. The latter had come to envy the infirm, whose condition makes them unable to act. I had to struggle against this feeling of cowardice, coupled with an invincible shyness".

If one considers it in this higher light, the life of Harmel becomes an incomparable lesson, a lived lesson, the best of lessons. One could take any chapter of this life and make it the theme of one's daily meditation for months; one would find in it the whole of Christian asceticism put into practice and adapted to present circumstances.

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Harmel was a man of prayer, devoted to the Holy Eucharist, practising frequent and soon daily Communion, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, adoration by day and by night.

His piety was affectionate, artless, trusting, childlike. Does not Our Lord insist on childlike simplicity? A piety that throws itself into the heart of the divine Master, eager for that self-abandonment which so many texts of our holy books suggest to us in the prayers of each day's Mass and to which we are so resistant, uncomprehending as we are of the mercy of God!

I found Harmel's accent again when I was reading recently the life of our exquisite Father Petit. Father Petit spoke of Our Lord to his retreatants at Tronchiennes as the "good Master", just as Harmel spoke of Him³.

Harmel took delight in the books full of unction, highly esteemed in his time and too much forgotten today, in which Father Faber poured out all his religious tenderness: *Tout pour Jésus, le progrès de l'âme dans la vie spirituelle*.

Franciscan asceticism enchanted him, that asceticism so simple, so welcoming, so joyful. — Read *le miroir de la perfection*, — and when he tries to discern, among the "countless graces with which he has

3. See **La Biographie du P. Petit**, by Fr LAVEILLE, Éd. du Museum Lessianum, 1927.

been filled, the greatest, the one that had the decisive influence on his life as a grown man", he answers himself: "I must admit that it is the Third Order... From then on my life and my apostolate were imbued with the Franciscan mentality, with its imperturbable optimism and its enthusiasms". And so he could not but rejoice to see the hopes that Leo XIII placed in the Franciscan Third Order. When, in the encyclical *Auspicato concessum est* of 17 September 1882, the Pope raised the idea of a social orientation for the fraternities, Harmel thrilled with joy and — with him the idea passing at once into action — offered his help.

Should we be surprised that Harmel willingly took on the duties of sacristan in the chapel of Val-des-Bois, and that he liked to play the organ there? A friend is indifferent to nothing that concerns the person of his friend. At the end of his life, obliged to spend several months each year at Nice, he remained for long recollected hours in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament; he obtained the signal favour of Mass in his house, and later even permission to keep the Sacred Species there; his letters to his family overflow with joy: "We intend," he said, "to make our stay at Nice a kind of first vespers of heaven."

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Harmel had the spirit of sacrifice in the highest degree. Father Faber taught him that suffering is "the gold coin of God". "Unhappy," says St Augustine — the saying was taken up and commented on by Bourget in one of his most powerful works — "unhappy those who have lost the use of suffering!" Harmel, on the contrary, was one of those who drew a hundredfold from suffering, who pressed out all its benefit, who received it as a fertilizing dew, not without pain, to be sure, but with that feeling of higher joy which our incomparable Catholic writer Louis Veuillot expressed in delightful terms when he said in one of his letters: "joy is in my soul and cannot enter my

heart, sorrow is in my heart and cannot enter my soul." A widower at forty-one, the father of eight children — he had nine, but one died in infancy — two of whom were snatched from him in the full flower of their youth, stricken in the person of a son-in-law and then of a brother, both precious and beloved collaborators, Harmel did not hesitate, at each blow, to kiss the new cross. When he had helped his own to die a holy death, he was on his feet again, consoling the survivors, ready for work. I have quoted a few lines from a letter written the day after his wife's death. After taking his daughter Maria to the convent of the Poor Clares at Paray-le-Monial, he wrote: "While we are on earth, do not hold back with us, beloved Jesus. Let our life be gnawed by cares and sorrows if you are to be glorified by it. But set the hearts of our children ablaze with your love". He wrote to his dear nun: "Have pity on your papa and pray the good Lord to take the pretext of my apparent good will to sanctify my life. The weeks pass like a flash, the months fly like hours, and nothing slows the dizzying race that has been sweeping my life along for some time. And so I long for rest, *Cupio dissolvi et esse tecum*. I long for rest beside the Beloved. Until then, let Him do with me what He will. All is well provided that we all meet again together at the meeting place." And again: "I hold suffering here below to be the first of goods. We shall have time up there to enjoy and rejoice. It will no longer be time to earn. Let us then be misers while we are in the time of harvest."

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From this friendship with Our Lord and this desire for reparatory suffering — a desire found in all the saints — the most sublime and most fruitful flower was the *Inner Association*, formed a little before 1870, which played a capital part in the life of Harmel and of several of those close to him.

To say a few words about it will be a natural transition from the study of the man to the study of his social work.

The Inner Association: where does this name come from, and why?

Inner because it shows itself outwardly by no visible sign. An association of voluntary victims for the conversion of the working world. "You know," Harmel would say to a sick man or a forsaken one, "how difficult a work the salvation of the workers is. To work at it effectively I need help. Will you be my associate?" A single obligation: a daily prayer in which one offered one's sufferings and one's life especially for the conversion of the workers of the whole world. "For this intention," the associate added, "I undertake, O my God, to ask you each day to accept me as a voluntary victim and to lead me, according to your good pleasure, by the way of crosses and sufferings, in the footsteps of your divine Son". Membership and the promise had first to be authorized by one's confessor.

The idea that presided over the formation of this Inner Association is the key to Harmel's whole social apostolate: to win souls, particularly the souls of workers, for Jesus Christ, and, to win them, to use every means suited to the present age and to the present milieu: such was the essential aim of his life and of his social apostolate.



It was about 1877 that Harmel joined for good the group of the *Association catholique* and of the *Catholic Workers' Circles*, in which shone the names of Mr Maignen, of Albert de Mun and of La Tour du Pin. Harmel's name henceforth took its place in that constellation. He had just published his *Manuel d'une corporation chrétienne*, drawn entirely from his experience as an employer. Even before, he had been on cordial terms with this group, but it is from this moment that his entry into the team that presided over this vast movement of social doctrine and action dates.

He was welcomed there as a choice recruit.

He did not come from the world of the craftsmen, like Maignen, nor from the old French aristocracy, like Albert de Mun and La Tour du Pin, but from large-scale industry, which until then had scarcely been represented in that school.

Earlier, he had been in close contact with another group, called *the Angers group*, presided over by Mgr Freppel, bishop of that city, which included professors of the Catholic faculties of Angers, such as Hervé-Bazin, a man of works as much as of teaching, the soul of an apostle, whose help was later to be won for the *Association of Circles*⁴, professors from Paris such as Claudio Jannet, and a Belgian, then a professor at the University of Louvain, an eminent mind, Charles Périn. This whole group drew its inspiration from the teachings of the school of *la Réforme Sociale* and of its master Le Play. Emphasizing the role of the employer, of the social authorities and of free associations, the Angers group was averse to the compulsory corporation and showed itself very distrustful of the intervention of the State.

Harmel had often applauded the religious and social declarations of Périn and of *the Angers school*; but the gravity and urgency of the labour problems led him to take his place among those who were then called the "interventionists", that is to say the supporters of a wide intervention of the State, as a temporary necessity at least, in the solution of questions concerning manual workers. Upheld by the great German, Austrian and Swiss Catholic sociologists, such as Hitzte, Vogelsang, Lichtenstein and Decurtins, by Englishmen such as Cardinal Manning, by Italians and Belgians such as Toniolo and Pottier, as well as by Maignen, A. de Mun, La Tour du Pin and Harmel in France, the so-called interventionist thesis triumphed at the famous Liège congresses from 1886 to 1890 and found precious confirmation in the teachings of the encyclical *Rerum novarum*.

4. See the captivating biography: **Un homme d'œuvre : Hervé Bazin**. Tours, Mame.

A fervent supporter of the *Association of Circles*, although "grumbling at times" because in his view too much theory was done there, Harmel would henceforth uphold its programme: the necessity of a wide intervention of the State, the collaboration of the social classes, the organization of workers' associations, progress towards the professional corporation made up of the different factors of production, endowed with a patrimony and with wide powers. But he would bring to it a very personal note, a democratic note.

For Harmel was a democrat; he must be named among the forerunners, the leaders of Christian democracy, in close communion of principle — if not always of expression — with men such as Toniolo in Italy, and Pottier, Kurth and Verhaegen in Belgium. I fully understood, on reading Fr Guittou's work, a statement that had surprised me when I had come across it, briefly set down, in earlier books such as the life of *Maurice Maignen*, by Charles Maignen⁵, namely that Harmel had sought to introduce into France the directions of Belgian Christian democracy. On many an occasion, moreover, Harmel paid tribute to the initiatives taken and the results obtained in Belgium in the matter of works for workers, and above all of autonomous workers' associations, and we are grateful to Fr Guittou for having taken care to record these testimonies, which we value most highly.

A democrat — in the social sense of the word — Harmel was one with all his soul, which was no common thing in the world of large-scale industry around 1870, twenty years before the encyclical *Rerum novarum*, and the experience of life only confirmed his democratic convictions. The fact is worth commenting on and explaining.

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Let us first distinguish Harmel's democratic ideas from his democratic feelings.

5. We reviewed it in the *Revue catholique des idées et des faits* of 24 June 1927.

One can be a democrat by feeling or by reason, or by feeling and reason at once: that was the case with Harmel.

He was a plebeian by temperament, a plebeian in his blood, yes, but, let us take care to add, without the slightest hint of antipathy towards the aristocracy. Let us remember that one of his most intimate friends in the *Association of Circles* was La Tour du Pin, who, while taking a close interest in labour problems, had renounced nothing of the traditions and spirit of the old French families. Often in conflict with La Tour du Pin on points of doctrine, he could not help calling him "a delightful and charming friend" and taking pleasure in the prospect of the eternal heart-to-heart that the life to come will hold in store for those who have loved each other here below with such a friendship. The affection was indeed mutual: "I loved him dearly," said La Tour du Pin, "he was always so kind to me."



Let us also distinguish social democracy from political democracy.

Harmel accepted the democratic political regime, the Republic founded on universal suffrage, without hesitation, or rather he did not even have to rally to it, because, unlike an Albert de Mun, to whom such a rallying was painful, Harmel had never conceived that any other regime was possible in the France of the nineteenth century. But Harmel always knew how to distinguish clearly between social democracy and political democracy; he did not wait for the encyclical *Graves de communi* to remember that the Church holds essentially to this distinction, since she admits and recognizes all forms of government, while she recommends social democracy to all her sons, understanding by that a Christian action for the material and spiritual good of the people.

Harmel went enthusiastically to this Christian social democracy; he practised it with fervour, he preached it tirelessly. But he gave it a

particular accent, he conceived it in a definite form. This accent, this form, must now be made clear.

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It did not take the clear-sighted industrialist of Val-des-Bois long to perceive that individual apostolate is insufficient in our age: from then on he recognized the necessity of creating a favourable milieu, to which he set himself without delay: the building of a chapel in the centre of the mill, the bringing in of workers' families, the provision of healthy and attractive housing, the improvement of the material condition of the population by relief funds, schools, recreational circles and family allowances. He was a "social authority" in the full sense that Frédéric Le Play gave to the word, whose first works had struck Harmel's mind. His example would acquire an immense power of radiation. It would herald the great movement that was to draw in a number of Catholic employers of the Nord. With them he would always maintain brotherly relations, although his social orientation differed from theirs on a point that he considered capital.

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In fulfilling the employer's duty — a duty of justice and a duty of charity — which he meant to carry out in full, Harmel found himself before two conceptions.

The one traditional, translating literally the old adage *patronus quasi pater*, the employer behaving towards his workers as a father towards his children, creating and maintaining for them and their families works in which they could find additional resources when the wage is small, assistance in emergencies, decent recreation, and the benefit of religious help. It was from this conception that most Christian employers of that time drew their inspiration.

The other innovative, suited to the economic and political conditions of today, shaped by a new mentality, taking account of that

“greater consciousness that the workers have gained of themselves”, as Leo XIII would say in his memorable encyclical; an emancipating conception, already much in favour in the United States, but which seemed revolutionary to the great majority of the industrialists of the Continent. According to this second conception, it is no longer a matter of making the workers’ happiness, but only of helping them to make it; it is no longer a question of securing them an improvement in their lot, but of collaborating in it discreetly, leaving them more and more initiative in the founding, the organization and the direction of the works that concern them materially, morally and religiously. To this bold conception Harmel would give his adherence more fully every day.

In his private notes one observes that he first uses the expression “what the employer must *do* by others”, and then, later: “what the employer must *get done* by others”, a simple change of form that reveals the development of his thought better than long commentaries; to rouse the worker to act, to lead the élite worker to devote himself to his fellows: that is the role of the employer.

The resounding failure of employers’ undertakings imbued with the old spirit was well calculated to confirm Harmel in his convictions: thus the outrage of 1882 against the factories of Montceau, in the north of France^{*}, factories directed by a man of high professional and moral worth, Mr Chagot. The disturbances of which these factories were the scene showed things to Harmel in a new light, a sinister light, whose reflection he tried to project in beneficial lessons by publishing a notable article in *L’Univers*; in it he endeavoured to show that the disaster of Montceau must be attributed to the adoption of

^{*} **NOTE** Montceau-les-Mines is in Saône-et-Loire, in Burgundy, and not in the north of France. The mines there were worked by the Compagnie des mines de Blanzay, directed by Léonce Chagot; the violence of 1882 (attacks on the chapel of Bois-du-Verne and dynamite bombings, attributed to the “Black Band”) was aimed at the management’s hold over the miners’ lives.

the patriarchal, paternalist method, wholly steeped in authority, a method that the modern working class could no longer bear. Giving a rare example of humility, Mr Chagot, far from being offended, thanked Harmel and declared himself converted.

How many vain efforts would have been spared if Harmel's directions had been followed sooner! How many excellent employers have unwittingly played into the hands of the socialist unions by clinging to outdated methods and showing systematic hostility towards the Christian unions! Thank God, a change has come about, but it is still far from complete; much remains to be done!

All the institutions that we mean to advocate today, the factory council, the formation of a workers' patrimony through a kind of labour shareholding, a right of oversight granted to the staff (over everything that concerns the discipline of the workshop), Harmel foresaw, and, what is better, he set them up in his own works long before public opinion took them up and debated them. His *Manuel d'une Corporation chrétienne*, published in 1877, marked an epoch. "Associate the workers in the good one wishes them. No social improvement is possible without the cooperation of the worker." "The present role of the responsible classes is above all a role of education": such are the watchwords on which he commented ceaselessly and which earned him many a criticism from the laggards.

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We have noted it: it was from this moment — 1877 — that the employer of Val-des-Bois joined for good the group of *the Association catholique* and the movement of the *Catholic Workers' Circles*. From then on his social action would overflow the limits of his own business to merge with the great work of international Catholic social reform.

He was thinking of it when a terrible fire^{*} fell upon his mills. The destroying flames stopped at the feet of a statue of the Virgin: Our Lady of the Factory (Notre-Dame de l'Usine). I have said how deeply Harmel had the Christian sense of trial: this is the occasion to insist on it.

Some will think that the disaster overwhelmed Harmel and made him withdraw into himself. Let them think again! Like Job, he saw in the calamity a sign of blessing and a providential mark of encouragement, whereas, shortly before, acclaimed at the Lyon congress, he had withdrawn thoughtful and alarmed. A marvel of supernatural spirit! This is the moment to say once more: What is a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles is wisdom in the eyes of one who has placed his ideal in the cross of Jesus Christ . — Harmel hesitated no longer: to his manifold activity as an employer he added a worldwide Catholic activity that ceased only with his last breath.

What was to be the dominant thought — aim and means — of Harmel's apostolate, the guiding idea of his part in the Catholic movement: this it remains for us to make clear.

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Let us remember the *Inner Association* that we mentioned at the end of our portrait of the man.

To win souls, particularly the souls of workers, for Jesus Christ: such, I said, was the thought that inspired this work and which, given the part it played in Harmel's life, governed all the concerns and all the undertakings of the Good Father: that was his essential aim.

And the means? Harmel knew that individual action is insufficient; he soon understood that the employers' institutions are something, but do not reach the whole working world, and that, even where they

^{*} **NOTE** The fire that destroyed the Val-des-Bois spinning mill took place in 1874, a few years before the date of 1877 given here.

are effective, they too do not meet all present needs. He very quickly and very clearly discerned that the workers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries want a workers' organization, and an autonomous workers' organization, that they claim to associate freely and without tutelage for the defence of their legitimate interests, while being glad to feel themselves supported and upheld, materially and morally, by the other social classes: the Christian union movement gives concrete form to this claim; this movement Harmel would strive to promote.

Harmel agreed with his collaborators of the *Association of Circles* in seeing in the mixed union — grouping employers and workers — or in the restored corporation — where employers and workers will be in contact at least through delegates — the ideal towards which one must strive, an ideal to which we today are much closer than our predecessors were. But Harmel was too practical not to realize the impossibility of reaching this ideal at once; in the meantime one must be content to group and organize the Christian workers. Harmel was told: "Do you know what you are doing in raising up the working class? You are organizing it against yourselves". Harmel answered with his good sense and his Christian sense: "They will organize without you. What will you gain by that? And above all — for this is what matters: what will Jesus Christ gain by it?"

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To form these Christian unions, and above all to lead them, an élite is needed, a workers' élite, since the workers' organization must be autonomous. It is therefore urgent to devote oneself to the formation of this élite, to its education.

That is why Harmel went about preaching the necessity of study circles long before Catholic opinion concerned itself with them: he knew that, if one wishes to act with consistency, a coherent doctrine is necessary, and that the worker hungers and thirsts for doctrine quite as much as the intellectuals.

That is why Harmel became a leader of workers' pilgrimages to Rome; he hoped to bring back from them a general staff deeply attached to the Church and to the Pope, and to Christ whose Vicar the Pope is — whether it be Leo XIII, Pius X, Benedict XV or His Holiness Pius XI — great days, intoxicating spectacles! Harmel seeing immense caravans of workers file through the halls of the Vatican amid a pomp until then reserved for emperors and kings, and hearing Leo XIII say to him: "Harmel, you are the man in France who has given me the most pleasure!"

That is why, finally, Harmel responded with enthusiasm to the Pope's call urging the Franciscan Third Order to take a social orientation: from there too he expected the élite that the Church needs.

By these three means he hoped to reach the goal better and more quickly. And in this whole programme of action, admirably linked together, one finds at the same time the mystic and the realist.



Of the one and the other closely blended, of the mystic and the realist, Harmel was a magnificent example.

When I think of him, after studying his life and his work, I see him as very great, with true greatness, that of the friends of God, and at the same time I feel him very close to us through his exquisite kindness and through his wholly present-day concerns.

And so it is that there are few men so able to comfort us and draw us on to good, to kindle in us and ceaselessly quicken the sacred fire, the zeal for the house of God, for that house of God which on earth is the Church militant, and for that other house of God which is the heavenly Jerusalem: "*In domum Domini ibimus*", "*We will go into the house of the Lord*".

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