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Léon Harmel, le Bon Père du Val-des-Bois
leonharmel.com

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LÉON HARMEL AND A MODERN CORPORATIVE EXPERIMENT



Leone Harmel.

In France more than elsewhere, the war has made painful gaps in every social class; but together with its bloody victims, in what is by now a two-year span of tragic history, it has seen the passing of representative men whose absence will be keenly noticed and felt in the period of restoration, which we hope is near.

The *Catholic social school* in particular has been struck by death: in the space of a year it has lost its three most illustrious leaders, who between them summed up half a century of fruitful intellectual and practical activity, and who had each won an eminent position, representing in contemporary society the Christian tendency of renewal in the field of economic problems.

First it was Count Albert de Mun, the chivalrous type sprung from the military aristocracy, who from the humiliations of 1870 and the horrors of the Commune had drawn the inspiration for a political and social orientation that would prepare France's return to her historic glories, but in a renewed setting, and upon an economic organism in which the essential principles of Christian justice and the modern aspirations of organised labour would be fused together; then came the news of the untimely end of Henri Lorin, a scholar of the boldest ideals and a generous benefactor, who had used his ample fortune to quicken around him the movement of Catholic social reformism with ever broader and more radical aims; later, on the 26th of last November, almost a hundred years old, at Nice, where he had withdrawn ten years before to spend the last years of his life in holiness, there died Léon Harmel, the well-known owner of vast mills at Val-des-Bois, in the valley of the Suippe, near Reims: he was the patriarch of the movement; a venerable, almost hieratic figure of employer and father, he enjoyed, not only in France but also in the other countries where the news of his singular institutions had spread — and especially in Italy, where we more than once saw him at the head of numerous French pilgrimages — a reputation for evangelical goodness that made people think of him more as a St Francis come back to life than as the head of a vast productive establishment; and indeed his personality, formed and developed in an atmosphere of fervent religious piety, seemed little in keeping with the character of his century and with his position as a great industrialist: and yet it was precisely from the initial contrast between the elements of his inner and spiritual life and those of his outward life, and from their later harmony in the Christian formula, that there arose the original figure of Harmel the organiser, as his contemporaries knew and admired him.

Léon Harmel was not a man whose biography it is worth the trouble to narrate, or whose thought it is worth expounding; he held no eminent place in the politics of his country, nor did he leave

volumes of doctrine, but only of practical instructions; his merit lay in having drawn from his religious faith the peremptory obligation to apply the principles of charity and justice among those in his employ, in having taken up, in order to meet that obligation, the inspiration of the moral and economic doctrines worked out by the thinkers and writers who shared his faith, and finally in having carried out the trial with a sincerity, a confidence and a conviction which, quite apart from any concrete result, have given it the value of a *social experiment* of the first order.

Léon Harmel and Val-des-Bois will have to be studied attentively by anyone who wishes to write the history of labour organisations, and to trace, through the different embodiments and the different experiences that the corporative principle has had in the Middle Ages, in the modern age and in our own contemporary world, the evolution of an institution which many persist, and not wrongly, in believing essential to the fabric of society in every phase of its economic development, and of which it is impossible to have an exact notion unless one follows it from its origins and watches it, step by step, evolve, decline, rise again and transform itself. That is why, before setting the work of Léon Harmel before my readers, it seems to me necessary to recall in its general lines what was, in the past, that *corporation* which, opposed by the socialists and celebrated instead by the social Catholics, has for some time reappeared, in the guiding principle of the union, as a probable factor in a future ordering of the new society.

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Historians have disputed a great deal as to whether the medieval guilds of arts and crafts arose as the last transformation of a Roman institution, or as a spontaneous product of the new political and economic conditions in which the cities of the empire found themselves at its decline and ruin: what is certain is that the guild presents itself as

an association intimately bound up with the life of the municipalities, indeed indispensable to the proper working of the new orders; rather than being invested with that double office, political and economic, which writers usually attribute to it, it could be defined as a true power of the State, directed to the attainment of that single civic good , in which were summed up interests that could hardly have been distinguished at that time, in all too modern language, into political, religious, economic and commercial interests.

The character of the medieval commune — examined above all in its Italian type — is chiefly that of a simple and complete organism, in which every part formed almost by itself, not so much through majority decisions as through unanimous consent and almost through the necessity of things. So it is natural that in a political institution in which the nobles and the clergy, because they were organised, represented true bodies capable of fulfilling the part that fell to them in the life of the city, the rest of the people, whom we may call the common people, should feel the need to give itself an order by which it too would be put in a position to fulfil its part in the public economy, and which at the same time, where necessary, would make it able to defend its own influence whenever others tried to diminish it. It is to be believed, however, that the need for defence was an element in the preservation and development of the popular associations rather than the cause of their origin; and if we find them in the form of guilds of arts and crafts, it is because the *kind of work* is the only legitimate distinction among the classes of the people.

That in the Middle Ages all those practising a craft were obliged to belong to the corresponding guild is not shown by any certain evidence: but that all citizens belonged to one, not only for professional advantage but especially because of the necessity which in those times led every man to have to take some place or other in public life, intimately fused as it was with private life, is not in doubt: less certain, on the other hand, is the fact that it was the custom of

the nobles (as is known of Florence) to enrol in certain guilds in order to share in those political functions which the guilds themselves later gradually assumed.

A prejudice, accepted even by authoritative historians, is that the medieval guilds had narrow aims, almost dangerous to society, aims which Cibrario, for example, summed up as follows: 1. to have the greatest number of members appointed to offices; 2. to make the opinion of the society prevail in the councils; 3. to take revenge for every offence, however slight, received in the persons or the property of its members; 4. to shield the agents of that revenge from the punishment they deserved: but these defects are accidental, and they became more marked later in the guilds of the Middle Ages when, with the fall of the popular governments, they came to lack a function of their own, integral to the life of the commune, and remained as mere professional representations. The evolution took place logically and almost imperceptibly: it began by taking from the guilds the right to make their own laws, and by subordinating those laws to the general laws, which before, on the contrary, had arisen precisely from the sum and the friction of the particular ones; then they were virtually deprived of the right to exist, their legal personality being made to depend on the consent of the prince, who did not by any means wish to suppress them, a thing impossible given the conditions of labour, industry and trade; but he wanted them entirely bound to himself, so that they would exercise no office other than the economic one and no longer arrogate a political one to themselves. The principle that the intermediate body between the State and the individual acquires life only from the recognition of the State itself, a principle utterly unknown in the Middle Ages and in the communal institutions, was strengthened as the monarchies and the lordships took shape, and remained as the true specific difference between the medieval guild and the guild of the modern age. From the freedom denied to anyone to associate in order to protect their professional rights

there thus came the absolutism that characterises the guilds of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: those excluded from the official guild cannot form themselves into a body and compete with the existing bodies, even if they are stronger than these, because the State, which it does not suit, prevents it: legitimate competition in work fails, because freedom of work fails, and that freedom is violated not by the guilds in themselves, but by the interference of the State in recognising them or not, and in spoiling their spirit.

Thus their statutes, as we approach the end of the eighteenth century, go on multiplying with too many functional reforms and with a complicated jurisprudence on very frequent disputes; and in reading them one comes away with the impression that the more the guilds shut themselves up within the bounds of their privileges, the further they move away from that ideal of a free and strong association, important in the life of the city, which we all glimpse in the medieval guild.

The series of privileges that make up the essence of corporative law in the eighteenth century is well known: suffice it to recall that, whereas in the preceding centuries, and especially in the first three of the second millennium, the guilds had as the reason for their existence the protection of labour through the association of all the workers, they ended by taking on the character of a closed caste: many of their beneficial effects, such as the curbing of competition and the fair setting of wages and of the relations between journeymen and masters, endured, but neutralised by the monopolising spirit they seemed to have inherited from the State, after the State had claimed for itself the right of life and death over them, and had shown, on the other hand, that it valued them only as a fiscal instrument which, by taking upon itself the whole assessment fixed for each trade, made the collection of taxes simpler and surer for it: hence the guild's commitment to keep a strict watch, so that no taxable element should escape its jurisdiction, and that no one could produce or sell except those who

paid; hence, again, the State's commitment to guarantee to its collecting agencies the privileges needed to make the fulfilment of their obligations possible.

Thus it was that at the end of the eighteenth century the guilds were in no position to resist the laissez-faire movement of the new economic science, and that governments were able to suppress them without opposition, indeed amid applause that seemed general.

However, less than a century later, there came from the economists who were beginning to rebel against laissez-faire a criticism that can be summed up in the following terms. Those who carried out the radical suppression of the guilds said they wished to do away with monopoly, in order to establish the reign of competition and of freedom of work; but they did not notice that the institution they were overthrowing was not in itself the cause of monopoly, but was so only because it had degenerated from its nature; and that to correct it and improve it by removing its absolutist excrescences would have been the best way to guarantee both competition and freedom of work itself; these, on the contrary, entrusted to the safeguard of a purely individualist system, have helped to create a painful situation of conflict between capital and labour, culminating in the abuse of the right of combination, that is, of the strike and the lockout. Indeed unbridled competition itself has produced dishonest speculation and the exploitation of labour, and has made freedom of work a mockery; it has given rise to large-scale industrialism, which is a fiercer monopoly than the old one, it has split into two hostile classes those orders of citizens whom the guilds kept together as brothers, that is, the holders of the instruments of labour and those who use them, and it has written, one may say, the first letter of the programme of scientific socialism: *socialisation of the instruments of labour*. Moreover, by breaking up the professional representations, it has deprived labour of political effectiveness, and has made the central power ever stronger on the one hand and individuals ever weaker on the other.

Finally — and this is a point of view peculiar to the *Catholic social school* — when one thinks of the eminently religious character that the corporative system bore, with the rules that imposed rest on feast days and the periodic gathering of all the members for special religious solemnities, one understands what a powerful element of morality and of social order, and therefore what a curb and what a rule upon the excess of desires, the greed for gain, the dishonesty of contracts and of work, and the exploitation of the workers, was removed with the suppression of the guilds.

From criticism to programme the step is short; so it is no wonder that from the first attempts at a systematic reconstruction of Christian sociology there emerged a thesis which was afterwards almost universally accepted by Catholic scholars: namely, that the sound corporative system — even with the modifications, institutional ones included, demanded by the modern development of economic doctrines and facts — must once again become the instrument of a better and more stable ordering of the social organism, founded on the harmony of interests and on the collaboration of the producing classes.

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This statement of principle formed for many years the basis of the action of the French social Christians, and it was precisely *La Corporation* that was the title of the organ of the Association of Workers' Circles (*Œuvre des cercles ouvriers*), founded by de Mun and La Tour du Pin shortly after 1870; but the undertaking of giving true life back to corporative organisation was one of the most arduous, and in certain respects seemed impossible: it was hindered by the system of large-scale industry, with the ever greater use of machines and with the division of labour; by the liberal, indeed laissez-faire, spirit of the laws and the legal tradition formed after the Revolution and codified by Bonaparte; by the principle of secularism, introduced as an essential postulate into every civil institution, through which

the religious cement that had been so powerful a factor of cohesion and discipline in the old corporative system would have been lacking; and finally by the opposition of socialism, definitively oriented towards the *class struggle*, in whose conception the *categories* were to be nothing but the battalions of a great army, the proletariat, marching to the conquest of public power, and thus to the creation of a State that would be the political expression of the working collectivity and would abolish every social hierarchy: only later was syndicalism proper to mature within socialism, a syndicalism which conceives political reconstruction no longer according to a unitary and egalitarian type, but according to a type of associated professional bodies, independent of a political power properly so called.

On the other hand, the advocates of a corporative restoration of the Christian type were not always agreed on the way of reaching it, or at least of tending towards it; and there were lively disputes between those who wanted the corporation to be *compulsory*, that is, imposed by law and regulated by laws, and those who wanted it *free*, though recognised by the State as a legal person and therefore endowed with the capacity to own property: thus a great deal was written by some in favour of the *mixed* corporation, that is, one made up of employers and workers together, as the only one that could realise the ideal of harmony between capital and labour, and by others in favour of the *pure* or *simple* corporation, that is, one composed either of employers alone or of workers alone, in view of the evident necessity that the body should not be undermined in its function by conflicts of interest, but that each group of interests should look after its own defence separately, and that harmony should thus arise not from a fusion but from a collaboration.

This whole movement of ideas, parallel to, and in a certain respect competing with, that of the socialist writers and organisers, led in France to the law of 21 March 1884, which, repealing the decree of the Constituent Assembly of 1791, authorised the establishment of

simple unions: it became the starting point for those who wished to pass from theory to practice; and it was especially in the field of practice that Léon Harmel could hold an eminent position and be a force and a value. By the authority that came to him from being a great industrialist, by the conviction that animated him, which he publicly professed and spread, that employers had the duty of making their workers happy, and that from the fulfilment of this duty they could also expect their own greatest profit[1], and by the intimate and deep faith he had in the restoring virtues of religion once more held in honour and made the inspirer and ruler also of social and economic institutions, he was always held in great esteem by the corporativists, who above all looked with satisfaction on the great experiment he had undertaken in 1867, and gradually developed and improved among the working masses of his vast mills at Val-des-Bois, through a network of representative bodies, welfare provisions and regulations, of which he himself gave an account, setting out the reasons for them, in two volumes that deserve to be known by students of the subject:

1. These are his own words in the *Manuel d'une corporation chrétienne*, part V: "Are not the time we devote to our works and the money they cost us amply repaid, from the industrial point of view, by conscientious work, by more diligent care, by greater stability, and by the affectionate and trusting understanding that makes management easier? Is it nothing, then, to see frank countenances and open faces, to live among men who love us and from whose affection springs a more sincere respect and a more real devotedness? And let us not even speak of the spiritual advantages: how could Jesus the Worker be indifferent to the homage paid to Him by an employer, that is to say the father of a large workers' family, not only of his own heart and the hearts of his family, but also of the hearts of all those of his workers who are beginning to love Him because they have learnt to know Him?"

Manuel d'une corporation chrétienne (1878) and *Catéchisme du patron* (1889)[2]. Val-des-Bois was indeed, for the social Catholics of France and of other countries, an example, a promise, I would almost say a symbol.

What is — or rather what was, for the war has called to arms nine sons and twenty-eight grandsons of Léon Harmel, has scattered his workforce among the regiments, and has abandoned the territory on which his mills stand to the ruin and the confiscations of the enemy — what was Val-des-Bois?

The Harmel firm, a producer of yarns and fabrics, was founded in 1797 in the Ardennes, and transplanted to Val-des-Bois in 1840; the father of the *frères Harmel*, who later took over the firm in their own name, had been the creator of the business: of him his son Léon left these written words: "I was brought up among the workers by a father who, throughout his long industrial career, had equally at heart the happiness of his little people of workers and the prosperity of his industry." The business went on growing larger and larger, and latterly its buildings occupied two and a half hectares of ground, divided into eighteen very large *workrooms*, each of which formed one section of the industry, together with the ancillary buildings needed for so important an undertaking.

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2. In this review twenty-seven years ago (*Nuova Antologia* of 16 November 1889, p. 226), an article was published, entitled *La Chiesa e la questione sociale* and signed "A former minister", in which, speaking of the *Catéchisme du patron*, then recently published, and after saying how, devoid of any scientific value, it concluded "that conciliation between employers and workers is to be sought in the recognition of their common dependence on God, in mutual charity, in resignation to one's lot", the author commented as follows: "But the question as the socialists put it is very different: personal relations between employers and workers take second place: the real problem is that of the relations between capital and labour": a comment just in itself, but unjust towards Harmel, who, as will be seen, conceived the problem precisely in this broader sense, and only wished that the relations between employers and workers should also be considered as one aspect of the relations between capital and labour.

The numerous workers — about eight hundred — or rather the numerous workers' families employed in the great factory, received from the beginning, through the care of the Harmels, various forms of assistance, provident institutions and cooperation which at the outset bore the character of patronage, that is, they were charitable initiatives of the owner, who wished to secure a stable, disciplined and devoted workforce, living in a state of well-being. It was in 1867, as I have already said, that all the institutions — among them some for religious assistance — were brought together into what was called the *Christian Corporation of Val-des-Bois*; but only in 1883 did the Corporation take on the character of a trade union, with the establishment of the Factory Council (*Conseil d'usine*), made up of the delegates of the individual departments of the mill, elected by the workers, and representing an effective share of the workforce in the technical and economic running of the business: the Factory Council — to which there corresponded a Workshop Council (*Conseil d'atelier*) for the women workers — was chaired by the employer, but it worked freely, especially after Harmel, in 1903, chose to stress its purely workers' character by excluding the managerial and supervisory staff from taking part in it. The Factory Council had its seat in a building of its own, the Union House (*Maison syndicale*), in which the offices of the various institutions and associations making up the corporation were also housed. The Factory Council met once a month, and its office was to deliberate on working conditions, rates, wages, internal regulations and the training of apprentices, and also to be consulted on technical questions: Harmel's fundamental principle in the exercise of his moderating authority was always the one he formulated in the maxim: "le bien de l'ouvrier par l'ouvrier, et avec lui, jamais sans lui; à plus fort raison jamais malgré lui". And one of his sons, the one charged with presiding over the Factory Council, once declared: "I have only one office in the Council, that of noting the workers' requests and satisfying them with the greatest prompt-

ness and generosity: and how could it be otherwise in a meeting at which I never receive anything but reasonable and legitimate complaints?"

Without doubt this optimism reveals a special side of the works of Val-des-Bois, namely the presence of ideal employers and of a working population educated by them and devoted to them; it reveals, that is, the action of moral elements prevailing over economic and professional ones: but this does not take away the intrinsic goodness of the organism, and can only lead one to consider the experiment difficult, if not impossible, wherever those elements are lacking.

If this is the basis and the substance of corporative organisation in its Christian conception, there is, however, all the machinery, which I will not call accessory but complementary, and which in itself offers the possibility of being applied wherever a considerable mass of workers gathers around a single industry and gives life to a community bound by the same interests[3]. Of this machinery the least easy but undoubtedly the most characteristic part is that of the *money* and of the *corporative bonus*, whose working can be summed up as follows.

The families belonging to the corporation each have a *corporative passbook*, in which they are obliged to have entered, as they go along, the amount both of their purchases from the corporation's approved tradesmen, and at the corporative office with the *bread vouchers*, and of the purchases made directly elsewhere: every three months the passbooks are handed to the treasurer, who determines the *corporative bonus* according to the sums entered in them; that is to say: the treasurer adds up on the passbooks the sums entered by each supplier; this result constitutes the amount of the rebate, which is paid into the corporative fund after 5 per cent has been deducted from it,

3. The numerous regulations of Harmel's corporative organisations are published as an appendix to his book *Manuel d'une corporation chrétienne*, in which the fifth part is devoted to the *Corporation chrétienne ouvrière de Val de Bois*.

which constitutes the *corporative bonus*, and which, on the occasion of feasts, is distributed among the members of the corporation itself according to the criteria fixed by a special Commission, or division, of the Corporative Council; this can happen regularly because the corporation has approved suppliers, over whose choice another internal division presides; and their list is then posted in the meeting places, together with the prices of the individual goods, fixed month by month by the commission; while the corporation issues its own money, which the suppliers accept and redeem at the corporative fund, paying it in addition a share of the total amount; the approved suppliers are naturally forbidden to sell to the families of the corporation at prices higher than those fixed, but the corporation in its turn guarantees them their credits with its members up to a fixed sum. For certain goods — such as coal and pasta — the corporation makes direct and collective purchases and shares them out; likewise for beer, coffee, preserves and wine, which are retailed through members specially appointed for the purpose; for cloth and clothing, it is the corporation that twice a year has them sent from wholesalers, and organises exhibitions where the mothers of families choose and buy, paying by means of deductions that the corporative fund makes from their credits.

Within the corporation there is also a mutual aid society, administered by a special division, which provides sick members with doctors and medicines, pays a daily allowance equal to the monthly subscription, or else pays for their admission to the nearby hospital at Reims, insures members against accidents, paying in the most serious cases pensions as well, which the member does not lose even when he is forced to leave Val-des-Bois, and, in case of death, an indemnity to the heirs equal to four hundred days' work; the mutual aid society also meets the cost of members' funerals and supplies school books to their children.

Alongside the general Corporative Fund there operate a savings bank divided into three sections, one for deposits above a hundred lire, one for smaller deposits and one for the deposits of schoolchildren, and a provident fund to come to the aid of workers who have served more than twenty-five years. Lastly, the corporation holds competitions among the sons and daughters of the workers to spur them on to vocational study, awarding the best an annual scholarship to the *School of Arts and Crafts* at Lille; and it administers a Home for childless widowers and for orphans.

All these works can live, and indeed flourish, because the profits of the Corporative Fund are distributed to them, profits which are made, as we have seen, from the suppliers' rebates and from the profits on sales, less the *corporative bonus*, but naturally supplemented by legacies and voluntary offerings.

Here the field lies open to the enlightened generosity of the owners, who moreover do something more on their own account; for it should be known that Léon Harmel had applied in his mill the *family wage*: not only by handing the whole of the wages to the head of the family, but also by setting up *a family fund*, which grants families an increase of sixty centimes on their wages each time the mother gives birth to a new child.

In addition Harmel had established production bonuses — a form of profit-sharing — while obliging the parents, however, to save them up for their daughters; for these, moreover, a *family boarding house*, at very modest charges, took them in, fed them and gave them a domestic education, so as to make good wives and good mothers of them.

And in the midst of the population of Val-des-Bois — most of it housed in small houses with gardens, spread within a radius of six hundred metres around the mill — stood the chapel, served by a priest specially delegated by the Archbishop of Reims, in which Harmel's workers could celebrate their weddings, baptisms and fu-

nerals, and received in the most varied ways the care of a particular spiritual assistance.

The example of the Harmels was imitated on a smaller scale, with meagre results, by other Catholic industrialists in the North of France; indeed they formed among themselves the Catholic Association of the Employers of the North of France (*Association catholique des patrons du Nord de la France*), which held frequent congresses; nevertheless the direction taken at Val-des-Bois, far from prevailing, met with considerable opposition and resistance, and so the experiment, in its value as a courageous and complete application of social Christian principles, may be said to have remained isolated: which makes all the more worthy of note and of study the work of the man who has just passed away at Nice, taking with him to the grave, perhaps, his great conception of justice, of peace and of faith, but leaving behind him an example, a trace, an echo, from which it may well be that others, in better times, will draw incitement and material for new, broader and more lasting efforts of social restoration and reorganisation.

Filippo Meda.