

REPORT

ON THE

**PILGRIMAGE OF THE FIRST GROUP OF FRENCH WORKERS
TO ROME**

15-25 OCTOBER 1889

PRESENTED BY

MR AMÉDÉE PROUVOST

TO THE MEETING OF THE EMPLOYERS
OF THE ROUBAIX INDUSTRY UNION

ON 5 NOVEMBER 1889



ROUBAIX

ALFRED REBOUX PRINTING HOUSE, 17 RUE NEUVE

1889

THIS EDITION

This is an English translation of the original French text, made for the website leonharmel.com in 2026. It follows the original sentence by sentence, without cuts or additions.

The text is given in full, translated from the 1889 edition. It has been typeset in the spirit of the original: title pages and headings follow the layout of the book; the illustrations have been cut out of the digitised document and restored.

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

leonharmel.com

Translated from the transcription of the copy digitised by the Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon (numelyo). BmLyon | numelyo (SJ Y 24/6, 2), Licence Ouverte.

Original document: https://numelyo.bm-lyon.fr/f_view/BML:BML_00GOO0100137001105559871

Version of 4 October 2026.

REPORT

ON THE

PILGRIMAGE OF THE FIRST GROUP OF FRENCH WORKERS TO ROME

15-25 OCTOBER 1889

R E P O R T
ON THE
PILGRIMAGE OF THE FIRST GROUP OF FRENCH WORKERS TO ROME
15-25 OCTOBER 1889

Gentlemen,

Your president thought it would be useful to sum up in a brief and concise report the impressions of our pilgrimage to Rome. I shall try to accomplish this task, happy if these modest notes can give a fair idea of what this solemn demonstration was, whose religious and social consequences will be so considerable.

What was the aim of this great pilgrimage, already nicknamed, before it was even formed, the pilgrimage of the ten thousand?

Leo XIII, who never ceases to take an interest in the lot of the most disinherited of his children, had said in an admirable impulse of his fatherly heart: “I wish to see the French workers; let them come, I will bless them, they will console me.”

It was the voice of the Pope, the venerable head of the Catholic Church, unjustly despoiled of his States, that was thus speaking to French hearts, to the children of the nation that was once called the eldest daughter of the Church.

In spite of all that has been done out of hatred for Christ by Freemasonry and the impious sects, the Christian faith is still great among us. Generous men, belonging to every rank of the hierarchy of the world of labour, answered this call; a great current swept across France, the crusade of the ten thousand was decided, and a whole people of workers would be seen coming to the feet of Him who holds the greatest sacred power on earth and who, by his international intervention, can best serve the cause of labour throughout the world.

Inspired by Léon Harmel, by the *Good Father* of all the workers of France, this pilgrimage was, from the moment it was announced, the

occasion of great joy for His Holiness Leo XIII amid all his sorrows.

The pilgrimage was organised by a Central Committee which sat at Reims under the honorary presidency of His Eminence Cardinal Langénieux, Archbishop of Reims, and under the effective presidency of Mr Léon Harmel.

For the Nord, the Diocesan Committee was composed of Messrs Carlier, vicar general, president; Lasne, archpriest and dean of Saint-Maurice in Lille, vice-president; Canon Delassus, Maurice Scalbert, Gand, Paul Féron-Vrau.

It is thanks to the zeal and devotedness shown by these Committees and their Sub-Committees that the Nord supplied 650 pilgrims. The employers had all eagerly responded to the appeal made to them, giving the workers who wished to take part in this pilgrimage every facility they could desire. The workers themselves bore a very large share of the cost of their journey. In some workshops a fund was built up by subscription to send one or more workers to be chosen by lot.

The Holy Father welcomed in advance these privileged children who were preparing to come and greet his august person, and who wished at the same time to console with their love the heart of their Father, broken every day by fresh outrages, to declare their unshakeable fidelity to the Apostolic Holy See, and, piously submissive to the successor of Peter, to beseech him to be so good as to take in hand the defence of their interests and to show them the way that leads to social peace.

On the morning of Monday 14 October the first train of 650 workers from the département of the Nord set off: it was the vanguard, coming from Lille, the most distant point of France. Roubaix, Tourcoing, Armentières, Merville, Saint-Omer, Bergues, Dunkerque, Douai, Arras, Amiens and Cambrai had sent strong contingents, grouped in good order and almost in military fashion.

Sheets very well drawn up through the care of Canon Carlier had been distributed in the carriages, setting out the programme of the recommended prayers and hymns.

Everywhere reigned the frankest cordiality, together with a certain recollection which showed that these were not ordinary tourists but true pilgrims.

The train ran at roughly the speed of an express. At Bove, a few hours before we passed, a derailment had occurred; at Saint-Denis a large factory was in flames; and further on, on the way to Mâcon, whole plains laid waste by the floods offered us the saddest sights.

These impressions could only be fleeting for us, and we thought of the other calamities, no less terrible, of the moral order, for which we were going to Rome to seek the remedy.

But we were drawing near to Savoy; the landscape became enchanting, autumn had gilded the leaves of the vines, and the sun, still warm, made the so picturesque mountains of the beautiful country of St Francis de Sales glow with the most varied colours.

We pass Aix-les-Bains and Le Bourget, that beautiful blue lake sung by Lamartine, then Chambéry, where our train stops almost opposite the convent of the Carmelites, whose bell was ringing out in full peal, calling to our minds the memory of its foundress, Marie Liesse de Luxembourg, Duchess of Ventadour, whom a recent book has made known and appreciated, and finally Modane, where we go through the customs inspection; we then pass through the Mont-Cenis tunnel. The transfer into the Italian carriages was to take place during the night at Turin, not without some trouble caused by the insufficient number of carriages. We reached Genoa at half past six in the morning: Genoa, called the Superb, with its marble palaces and its gulf, which looks like a great lake furrowed by many ships; and as we travelled along the coast we also admired the luxuriant vegetation of its pleasure gardens, where exotic plants, palms and eucalyptus trees are displayed.

As far as La Spezia the route is very beautiful, but unfortunately spoilt for the onlooker by the many tunnels into which our train plunges at every moment. In passing we catch sight of Pisa, its Campo Santo, its leaning tower, its cathedral, then Civitavecchia, and at last here is Rome, the holy city, which we make out through the evening mists.

On the station platform the pilgrims gather in groups according to the various lodgings assigned to them, such as St Martha's at the Vatican, the Propaganda, the Trinità dei Pellegrini, the Hôtel de Milan, the Lateran Palace, the Convent of the Sisters of Cluny, the Franciscans, the American College, the Ponterollo Hospice, the Passionists, the Canadian College, the Stigmata, etc.

In each of these places, members of the Roman commission received the pilgrims; at St Martha's, where the largest group was lodged, immense dormitories took in workers, employers and clergy all together, mingled and united by that Christian brotherhood which draws from religion the strength of this gentle bond, whose charm one feels so willingly in these times of pilgrimage.

The Daughters of Charity carry out the service in this immense maze as graciously as possible, and proceed to sort out all the pilgrims, which is a somewhat complicated task. Mr Lugari, specially entrusted with the management of Sainte-Anne, displays a zeal and devotedness that cannot be praised too highly. At half past midnight everyone was at last enjoying a wholesome and beneficial rest.

On the Thursday, at six o'clock, the rising bell was rung; a solemn Mass for the pilgrims was celebrated at the altar of the Chair of St Peter by the Archpriest Lasne, Dean of Saint-Maurice in Lille. Emotion ran high among this immense crowd of pilgrims who came to kneel at the tomb of St Peter, Prince of the Apostles, preparing themselves in this way, as by a vigil of arms, to come and greet his descendant in the person of Leo XIII.

During the Mass the *Credo* was sung in a strong voice; taken up by those hundreds of breasts, it was truly fitting in such a place and at such a moment. Canon Carlier addressed the pilgrims in an eloquent allocution in which he paraphrased the words the Holy Father had sent to the pilgrims: “Come to me, all of you, French workers.” He ended his address by recalling that he who clings to Peter and to his successor shall never perish. The pilgrims then visited the basilica in detail, where so many splendours are displayed before dazzled eyes and form a marvellous whole that calls to mind the most glorious memories of history and the arts.

“St Peter’s is the first temple in the world by its gigantic proportions, by its triumphant architecture, by its riches of every kind, and above all by the relics of the great Apostle, on which it rests as on an unshakeable foundation, close to the Vatican, palace of the Sovereign Pontiff and of Raphael, which shelters under its blessed roof the first Majesty here below and the most perfect Works of human genius.

“It was the Popes who, by their largesse and their august affection, drew to Rome and kept there both Raphael, the divine young man, and Michelangelo, the sublime old man; who, from Giotto to Ingres and Flandrin, protected and inspired all the princes of art. It is they who brought it the visits of sovereigns and great men, of orators and poets, from Charlemagne to Lamoricière, from Petrarch to Chateaubriand, and that universal concourse of pilgrims of all nations who, from century to century, have brought it the tribute of the admiration, the love and the wealth of the whole world.”

After the visit to St Peter’s there began the first day of visits through Christian Rome, where for five days, thanks to experienced guides, they were able to explore all the wonders of Rome: the great basilicas, St Paul’s, St John Lateran, St Mary Major, Holy Cross in Jerusalem, St Lawrence outside the Walls; the Colosseum and the Mamertine prison, the Scala Santa, the Catacombs where nascent Christianity took refuge during the persecutions. It is there that the

Apostles were buried, and after them the Martyrs. It is there that one can still read the inscriptions which make up the history of the dogmas of our religion, and that one sees represented by a thousand symbols Baptism, the Eucharist, Marriage and the other Sacraments.

The Holy Father had given orders that the major relics should be shown to the pilgrims everywhere; and so they saw many things usually hidden from mere tourists. They were thus able to satisfy their piety and, as the days were well divided, they went round all the principal monuments of ancient Rome, the palace of the Caesars, the Appian Way, the Capitol, the palace and museums of the Vatican; and their dazzled eyes gazed in wonder at the marvels of the Eternal City.

During the five days of the pilgrimage, Mass was celebrated in turn in one of the great basilicas.

After St Peter's came the turn of St John Lateran and St Mary Major. The same ceremonies and the same hymns were repeated there.

The Masses were said each day by Prelates: on the Friday by His Lordship Mgr Sourrieu, Bishop of Châlons-sur-Marne, on the Saturday by Mgr Potron, Bishop of Jericho, and on the Sunday by His Eminence Cardinal Langénieux.

But the great emotions were reserved above all for the audiences of the Holy Father. The first took place on Sunday 20 October. The pilgrims first gathered in the morning at St Peter's, about 2,000 in number. His Eminence Cardinal Langénieux offered the Holy Sacrifice at the altar of the Chair of St Peter. The choir of the great basilica was heard, alternating with the pilgrims, who struck up once more the *Credo*, the *Magnificat* and the superb hymn "*Workers, be Christians.*" These hymns were very well performed, and one felt that the voices vibrated in unison, thus expressing the faith of the pilgrims and their common hopes. Communion was given by His Eminence himself; the number of pilgrims who received Communion was

so great that the hosts ran short, and the Pope, to whom an account of this ceremony was given, was particularly touched by this detail.

At eleven o'clock the groups from the various localities formed up in St Martha's Square, in order to enter the Vatican in close ranks by the Zecca staircase; the line of pilgrims stretched over a length of 500 metres and formed a small army, silent and recollected, to the great astonishment of the Italians present, who admired the discipline that reigned of its own accord in all the ranks.

Order was kept by the organisers of the pilgrimage; the whole small pontifical army was on duty inside the Palace, to form a guard of honour for the pilgrims and then to receive the Holy Father solemnly on his entry into the audience hall.

This immense hall, which is the hall of canonisations, situated above the portico of St Peter's, was literally packed; the workers occupied the best places, facing the throne and on either side, to the right and to the left; behind them more than a thousand clergy and lay people of the French colony had taken their places.

Each group takes the place assigned to it; the throne occupies the centre of a very high, magnificently decorated platform, around which the whole pontifical court and the organisers of the pilgrimage will take their places.

At a quarter to twelve the arrival of the Sovereign Pontiff is announced, surrounded by twelve cardinals: these are Their Eminences Ledochowski, Simeoni, Rampolla, Melchers, Langénieux, Vannutelli, Mergo, de Ruggiero, d'Annibale, Cristofore, Appolloni, Macchi and Mazella; by ten bishops, among them Mgr Sourrieu, Bishop of Châlons, and Mgr Potron, Bishop of Jericho, and among the prelates Mgr Pujol, superior of Saint-Louis-des-Français, and Mgr d'Armailhac, chamberlain to His Holiness; and by his whole civil household. As soon as Leo XIII has mounted the Sedia Gestatoria amid the Flabelli, enthusiasm breaks out and the vaults of the immense hall ring with repeated acclamations: Long live Leo XIII! Long live the Pope-

King! The august old man is extremely pale; his hand is lowered over the crowd to bless it, and his countenance, which reflects goodness, expresses at the same time the majesty of the supreme power with which he is invested. Every head bows, and it is a truly moving sight to see with what respect the French workers received this first blessing, which they had come so far to seek!

The Pope takes his place on his throne; the cardinals and prelates sit in two rows facing the throne. Then His Eminence Cardinal Langénieux rises, bows and reads his Address to the Holy Father, in which are so well expressed all the feelings of filial love of the workers and employers who had come to Rome, as well as the organisation and aim of their works, the principles that inspire them and the hopes of salvation they warrant.

His Eminence presents the first group of the pilgrimage of French workers, bringing to the Holy Father the testimony of their faith and their love.

He says “that as Christians they remember the part the Church has always played in Society, protecting with jealous care the class of the poor and the disinherited; that she ennobled labour and made it meritorious before God; that she had created and encouraged the great corporative institutions. They also remember, he says, the words Your Holiness addressed to them: ‘We shall never cease to do for the improvement of your lot all that Our office and Our Father’s heart may suggest to us’”; and he recalls that only a few months ago the Holy Father deigned to praise the plan to establish a common legislation for the industrial nations of Europe, in order to keep from the working class the evils from which it suffers and to protect the family.

“Those who care about the lot of the workers will therefore unite their efforts with the aim of shielding childhood from premature fatigue and from the perils of the workshop, of preventing the daily work from being prolonged beyond fair hours, and of guaranteeing

the Sunday rest, hoping thus to fight the moral plague which is creeping into the veins of Society, attacking at once morality, justice, human dignity and the domestic life of the worker.”

His Eminence depicts the abandonment in which the working class finds itself amid the theories of modern economists, infected with unbelief, the ever-growing machinations of usurious speculation, and the deplorable consequences of the excessive armament of the European nations, always ready to hurl themselves upon one another; and so the world of the workers, without the solid foundations of faith, would soon become powerless and rebellious, if it did not have recourse to the Church, whose sacred power has always carried supreme weight in the Christian commonwealth.

His Eminence then alludes to the remarkable intervention of Leo XIII on various occasions and also paints a picture of the different influences that rule the world: on one side selfishness, on the other devotedness; and it is to the latter that he appeals, as well as to the public authorities, to safeguard the interests of the small and the weak.

Then, looking further and higher, he respectfully raises his voice and his hands towards His Holiness, in whom he venerates the authority and the fatherhood of God.

He ends by saying: “May Your Holiness, so sorely tried yourself by the injustice of men, deign therefore to join the humble cause of your children to your own, so august and so dear to our hearts, and to pour out an abundance of heavenly blessings upon the French workers, their families and their works.” This address, read in a clear and ringing voice, was received by the whole assembly with the sympathy it deserved.

The Sovereign Pontiff then delivers the masterly address that everyone knows. He recalls the joy given him two years ago by the coming of the French workers to Rome on the occasion of his jubilee year. He welcomes these Christian workers, who have understood

that religion alone could give them strength and consolation amid the toils and miseries of this world. “Religion alone,” he says, growing animated, “will raise your labour to the height of human dignity and freedom.” He recalls what the weak part of mankind was under Paganism. It was slavery! But Christianity came and declared that all were, by the same title, sons of the Heavenly Father and redeemed at the same price; that work was the natural condition of man on this earth; that to accept it with courage was an honour for him and a proof of wisdom; that to wish to evade it was at once to show cowardice and to betray a sacred and fundamental duty. He says that Christ himself chose to suffer as we do and that, according to his teaching, the rich man was created to be God’s treasurer on earth. To him the precepts on the right use of temporal goods; against him the fearful threats of the Saviour, should he close his heart to misfortune and poverty. “The two classes had to be brought together, and a religious and indissoluble bond established between them. That was the part played by charity.” The Holy Father then lists the benefits of Christianity during the centuries that have passed down to our own day. We must seek to revive, at least in substance, in their many beneficial virtues and in whatever form the new conditions of the times may allow, those guilds of arts and crafts, all of whose advantages he enumerates; “what We ask,” he adds, “is that, by a sincere return to Christian principles, there should be restored and consolidated between employers and workers, between capital and labour, that harmony and union which are the sole safeguard of their mutual interests and on which depend at once private well-being and public peace and tranquillity.” The remedy for present evils will not be found in the overthrow of what constitutes, so to speak, the very essence of civil and political life. He shows it to us in *the faithful fulfilment of the duties incumbent on all the classes of Society*, in respect for and the safeguarding of the functions and attributions proper to each of them in particular.

He reminds the *ruling classes* of their duties: to assist the weak and the workers, to curb the insatiable desire for riches, luxury and pleasure. *To those who hold power*, he says that justice and arms are not enough to check the evil that is undermining Society; the Church must be given full freedom of action; by her divine precepts she will preserve purity of morals and the habits of an orderly and Christian life in the family and in individuals. *To employers*, he prescribes that they regard the worker as a brother, that they ease his lot as far as possible and, by fair conditions, watch over his interests, spiritual as well as bodily, that they edify him by the good example of a Christian life and, above all, that they never depart, in their dealings with him and to his detriment, from the rules of equity and justice. *To the workers*, he recalls fidelity to their religious, domestic and social duties, resignation to work accepted in a Christian spirit, respect for the employer's authority and, finally, filial attachment to the Church. Then, speaking of himself, Leo XIII says: "Our condition grows worse with the years, and the need for Us of real independence and true freedom in the exercise of Our apostolic ministry becomes more evident day by day. As good Catholics, remain faithful, dear Sons, to this most noble cause; make it your own; let each of you, in his own sphere, make it a duty to defend it and to hasten its triumph. Return to your homes and prove by your conduct that in associations where religious principles are held in honour, there reign at the same time brotherly love, peace, discipline, sobriety, and the spirit of foresight and domestic thrift. Go, and may the grace of the Lord accompany you everywhere, assist you, protect you, sustain you in your toils, and encourage you by letting you taste, even now, the ineffable joys that flow from virtue and that are given by the hope of a better life in the Fatherland of believers."

Leo XIII, by his teaching and the doctrines he brings to light, powerfully encourages the generous men who, for some years now, have sought the moral and material improvement of the worker.

It is the Church who, at all times, has been the mother of the poor, has worked to heal his wounds and to ease his lot.

Those who wish to practise nothing but pure philanthropy, withdrawing from this beneficent influence, are building on sand, and their edifices will collapse of themselves.

After reading his address, Leo XIII raises his hands and blesses the assembly, prostrate and moved; then he receives one by one the delegates of the thirty chief towns that sent pilgrims, blesses them individually while they kiss the Pontifical slipper, and when he has been placed again on the Sedia, the most enthusiastic acclamations ring out.

The next day, in this same hall, the Holy Father celebrated Holy Mass before the same pilgrims, and a Paris newspaper describes in moving terms the impressions felt at this ceremony.

“It is an unforgettable sight to have seen the august old man pass through the ranks of the French workers, whose manly faces, bowed under the blessing of the Vicar of Jesus Christ, so well reflect the feelings of love and devotedness that fill their hearts.

“One feels running through the whole hall an impression at once violent and sweet, which brings tears to the eyes of all present.

“After a short prayer the Pope begins the Mass. He climbs the steps of the altar, and the closer he draws to it, the more his body, weakened by cares and bitterness, seems to recover new vigour at this source of life and sacrifice.

“When he turns towards the people, with his arms outstretched, one reads in his gaze a solicitude and a love so fatherly that all our pilgrims are deeply moved by it.

“The very high altar allows everyone to gaze upon Leo XIII and to follow every detail of the Mass. The choir of the Sistine Chapel sings those wonderful chants of which Italy has, so to speak, the monopoly. His Holiness had asked Cardinal Langénieux to designate sixteen persons, chosen from among the organisers of the pilgrimage, so that

he might give them Communion himself. When the Mass is over, the Holy Father, kneeling at his prie-dieu, recites the prescribed prayers. And, we must confess, his voice reaches us, moaning and plaintive, like a supreme protest against all the iniquities heaped upon him, against all the spoliations of which he is the victim. There is not one of those present who did not feel his heart tighten and who did not understand in this supplication all the anguish and all the sorrows of the Papacy.”

The evening meals that followed such well-filled days were real feasts; the most illustrious prelates, Mgr Angeli, Mgr Jacobini, the Bishop of Jericho, the diocesan authorities, Mgr Bannard, Canon Carlier and His Eminence Cardinal Langénieux himself came to visit the workers and to serve them. And so they were warmly acclaimed, and their speeches were answered by the most heartfelt *Vivat*. On the day of farewells, the speeches of Mr Harmel and of Mr Bayart were also the occasion of general acclamation.

At last, on 22 October, we set out again on the road to France, keeping the most vivid impressions of this pilgrimage, whose memories I have just retraced for you.

We have come back from Rome strengthened in our principles and our beliefs; they alone can form a solid foundation for our social Works. The ground on which we shall now walk will be better known and more fertile; every day we root out the weeds from it; it remains for us to go on sowing the good seed there, and we may be assured that God, who has blessed it, will ripen the harvest there.

