



**The Pilgrimage of Labour**

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**to Rome in 1889**

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**and the Pope's Address.**

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Address delivered at the closing session  
of the Lille Congress, on 24 November 1889,  
by Abbé Fichaux, President  
of the Catholic Association  
of the Employers of the Nord.

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**Imprimerie Saint-Augustin,**

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DESCLÉE, DE BROUWER ET C<sup>ie</sup>, LILLE.

## THIS EDITION

This is an English translation of the original French text, made for the website [leonharmel.com](http://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.

The numbered notes are those of the original work; here they are numbered continuously from beginning to end.

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

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## **The Pilgrimage of Labour to Rome in 1889 and the Pope's Address.**

Address delivered at the closing session  
of the Lille Congress, on 24 November 1889,  
by Abbé Fichaux, President  
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Someone other than myself was to have spoken to you, gentlemen, about the pilgrimage to Rome. A witness, still under the spell of the most stirring emotions, would have spoken to you worthily of that solemn demonstration. He would have told you of the gracious condescension of a great Pope, of the deeply respectful feelings of the workers, of their cordial ease with the employers who accompanied them, and of the eager devotedness of the latter. You will regret, as I do, that illness keeps Mr Bayart far from us.

It is impossible, nevertheless, for the Lille Congress to remain silent about this important undertaking, in which the Nord was so widely represented. Allow me, as President of the Catholic Association of the Employers of the Nord, to take the place of a friend who is prevented from coming. And if I cannot describe to you, as having seen them with my own eyes, the unforgettable scenes of the pilgrimage, I shall at least be able to dwell on its high social significance, and to echo the grave teachings of the apostolic chair.

This embrace of the Papacy and the French worker, and the words that served as its commentary, contain a lesson that I should like to put into words for you. Ah, if only the worker could understand! if only he could appreciate what he has become in modern society, in the midst of a materialist civilization, and what the Church would wish him to be! Since there is so much talk today of the labour ques-

tion, or of the social question, which is the same thing, see how the Church proposes to solve it for the benefit of all, and above all for the benefit of the worker.

The Paris Exhibition, gentlemen, was about to close. Nothing had been lacking to its success. All the finest things that the genius of industry and the arts could bring forth had been gathered there. The past itself had yielded up its most precious remains to heighten the splendour of the present. The tower of gigantic proportions, the illuminated fountains, the rarest spectacles borrowed from the most distant shores, had seized the popular imagination. The masses had been stirred; and just as, in the ages of faith, the multitudes had once been seen flocking to our great pilgrimages, so this time they could be seen making their way in serried ranks towards the great wonder of our day.

It was an incomparable festival, which ought to have been the glorification of the human intellect and of God its Author, and which became, alas, for the greater number, a festival of the senses, inspired by a civilization ordered entirely towards pleasure. The most brilliant festivals have their morrow. When the lights are out, when real life has resumed its uniform course, when the soul begins to reflect, how can one not ask oneself whether those rejoicings were timely in view of ever-threatening eventualities, and whether that proud pomp was not an insult to all the material or moral miseries that beset us?

For the worker in particular, the Exhibition was a kind of mirage, the dazzling vision of a sensual paradise. When the vision vanished, he found himself once more empty of faith, without immortal hopes, in the hardship of his humbled position. How could he have remained unmoved by so heartbreaking a contrast? How could he not have conceived a keener sense of his abasement and his misery? More ardent covetousness, more stubborn hatreds, a revival of the socialist spirit: such is the clearest result of that great exhibition.

It was the hour, gentlemen, to open other prospects to the worker, and to bring him to an august and venerated Father, so that, instead of the disdain that crushes him elsewhere, he might find there the respect that raises up and the tenderness that consoles. Envy and mistrust were sprouting in hearts; why should not patience and love be sown there? Such was the language of generous Christians. Since Paris, they said, offers the worshippers of modern civilization nothing but a spectacle for the eyes, let us go and seek in Rome purer joys and more strengthening emotions. There is the successor of Peter, heir to the sacred deposit of eternal truth. On his infallible chair he awaits us; and to whom should we go, in the night in which we find ourselves, if not to him, since he now has, like his Master, the words of eternal life: *verba vitæ æternæ!* (Applause.)

The Christian workers answered the call. Their employers, Christians themselves, not content with helping them by a fraternal subsidy, took their places beside them; and the France du Travail (Labour France), having but one thought and one heart within this elite, set out joyful and confident for the Vatican. A guiding angel led the pilgrims' steps. It was the successor of St Remi on the ancient see of Reims: Reims, with its baptistery, the cradle of old France! And who better than the Cardinal of Reims could have presented to the Vicar of Jesus Christ these first fruits of a France tempered anew in the holy energies of its baptism? (Applause.)

What kindness welcomed them, what smiles were lavished on them, ask our workers: they will tell you with all the enthusiasm of their gratitude. They will tell you of all the consideration shown them by the high dignitaries of the Pontifical Court, but above all of the gentle and fatherly hospitality of the Sovereign Pontiff. Indeed, it was the Pope they were going to console, it was to the Pope they were going to entrust their lot. The monuments of the old capital of the world did not leave them indifferent. They admired the basilicas, St Peter's, St Paul's, St Mary Major, the relics of the saints, the

tomb of the holy Apostles; but above all it was the Pope who stirred their hearts, it was the Pope whom they acclaimed at the memorable audience of 20 October, it was the Pope's word that their docile souls took in, and that they have brought back to us as the echo of divine truth, as the most authoritative of directions. Listen, gentlemen, to this teaching: it is worthy of your respect and of your whole attention.

Paganism had found nothing better, to solve the social problem, than slavery. The Church has never ceased to protest against that odious solution: the worker is not a slave. *Paganism had claimed to strip the weak part of humanity of its rights, to stifle its aspirations, to paralyse its intellectual and moral faculties, to reduce it to a state of absolute powerlessness*<sup>1</sup>. That is the slave indeed! A man delivered defenceless to injustice; a man condemned to suppress every aspiration, every desire for honour, glory and happiness, so as to remain uniformly at the same degree of abasement; a man who has no right to develop his natural powers, to recover possession of himself, to have a personality; a man systematically diminished, degraded, reduced to powerlessness, to the point of no longer having even any awareness of human dignity!

I would not dare to say, gentlemen, that modern civilization deliberately conspires to bring the worker back to that level. Willingly or not, the Christian spirit still holds too much sway; there is still too keen a sense of human liberty. And yet it is only too true that such is the fatal end of the principles it strives to popularize. The servitude of the weak is the inevitable consequence of the war on God and on the Church in which it persists with such relentlessness. And while it pursues this baneful work of degradation, its followers accuse the Church of obscurantism, as though she had made it her task to extinguish minds and to stupefy wills!

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1. Address of the Holy Father to the worker pilgrims, 20 October 1889.

Workers whom I see on the tiers of this amphitheatre, more than once, at the meetings to which you were invited, you have heard it from the mouths of those who flatter you in order to exploit you. Well, no, it is not so; you are being deceived. Christ, who came down from Heaven to lift fallen creatures in his arms and bring them back to God, did not come to debase humanity; and the Church, which continues his work, will never have, be well assured of it, any other ambition than to raise souls up and to ennoble them. (Applause.)

Christianity knows no distinction of castes. “*The whole human family is called to share in the divine inheritance: all are, by the same title, sons of the heavenly Father and redeemed at the same price*<sup>2</sup>. This is not to say that there is no inequality of conditions: *this inequality is inevitable*<sup>3</sup>. But what does it matter, if, notwithstanding this superficial inequality, there is a share in one and the same life, in the divine life, the same sonship towards the same heavenly Father, and consequently, in the highest of families, the closest brotherhood? Whoever you may be, were you the lowliest of artisans, by the very fact that you are baptized, you belong to the family. Its features are engraved in your soul; they show in your countenance. If you have not fallen from your baptism, you are no stranger to me, I recognize you; and while my brow bows, my heart opens to greet you: hail, brother! (Applause.)

Do you understand, workers, to what height Religion raises you? And because your life is to be devoted to necessary toil, have no fear: you have not thereby fallen from your exalted station. Paganism disdained manual labour and reserved it for the outcasts of mankind, for slaves. The Church understands it quite otherwise. The Pope will tell

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2. The Pope's address.

3. The Pope's address.

you, gentlemen: *Work is the natural condition of man; to accept it is an honour for him and a proof of wisdom!*<sup>4</sup>

God could have completed the work of creation himself, with his almighty hands, and brought the things we use to their final perfection. Man would then have been a kind of idle parasite, seated at the banquet of life and enjoying a well-being to which he had in no way contributed. We understand enjoyment without work at the end of a laborious life: we would have complained to God had he imposed that condition on us in the full vigour of our years. If it is pleasant to enjoy the goods that surround us, there is more honour in enjoying them after having at least helped to produce them. God has not begrudged us this honour. He himself never ceases to work, *usque modo operatur*, but he calls us to cooperate with him, and man's work, by an admirable partnership, becomes as it were the extension of God's work. (Applause.)

Tell me, gentlemen, does work, as the Church understands it, seem to you in any degree a humiliation? Do you not find, on the contrary, that the Pope is a thousand times right to call it *an honour and the natural condition of humanity*? It is so much our natural condition that, without work, man in general no longer has the means to subsist. Man has arms to fashion, together with his fellows, what is necessary for his existence. If he prefers to fold his arms and remain idle, instead of giving proof of wisdom he gives *proof of cowardice*, and betrays himself *by betraying a sacred and fundamental duty*<sup>5</sup>.

And so, gentlemen, when the Son of God deigned to take on our humanity, he willed, by a deliberate choice, to be a worker himself. As God, in the union of the divine Trinity, he is the co-worker of his Father, *Pater meus usque modo operatur et ego operor*; and as man, in the house of Nazareth, the apprentice of Joseph the artisan, taking up

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4. The Pope's address.

5. The Pope's address.

the same words, could in all truth say again: *et ego operor*: I too am at work; I too am a worker! (Applause.)

It is true that work, in the present conditions of humanity, does not come without painful effort. It is true that it has its ups and downs and its failures, that it has no guarantee of stability. Life is hard at times for the worker, whom sickness reduces to helplessness or unemployment condemns to a barren rest. *In order to comfort him more effectively, the divine Founder of Christianity did not disdain to add example to words. He had nowhere to lay his head; he suffered the rigours of hunger and thirst; he spent his life, public as well as private, in toil, anguish and suffering*<sup>6</sup>.

And since, in spite of everything, indigence had to be remedied and the indispensable resources provided for it, Providence saw to this by raising wealth to the dignity of a function. There is a selfish and sordid wealth, which would like to hide its vanity beneath the deceptive glitter of excessive luxury. There is another wealth of which we must not speak ill, because it is willed by God, and because it bears witness to his wisdom and his goodness. The great human family needed a reserve for bad days, just as the modest families who people our cities need one. The common Father has therefore stored up treasures for the benefit of his unfortunate children, and *the rich man* is nothing other than *God's treasurer*<sup>7</sup> (Applause.)

The rich are never so great as when, faithful to their mission, they pour out generously into the bosom of the poor the goods of which they are the trustees. They uncrown themselves when they close their hearts to misfortune. And at the same stroke society is wounded to death, because order is disturbed in one of its fundamental conditions. Providence is betrayed by its agents; hearts that no longer feel its goodness grow bitter, jealousies are inflamed, and the disinherited

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6. The Pope's address.

7. The Pope's address.

of fortune claim with anger and without measure the alms that more faithful dispensers ought to have given them sooner.

Will it then be enough, gentlemen, to strengthen Society, to reopen the treasuries closed by greed? to bring the rich man to a sense of his duty and of his interest? and if need be to compel him to it, as several imprudently wish, by legal provisions? No, that would not be enough. To draw the divided classes together, something other than this fragile and superficial bond is needed. A more intimate and deeper bond is needed, an indissoluble bond, the religious bond; and that, the Pope tells us, is *the part of charity*<sup>8</sup>.

Wealth can be poured out without hearts being given. It is sometimes said of the rich man who gives alms that he is doing charity. In that sense one can do charity without having anything of the virtue of charity. True charity is a movement of the heart that needs to burst forth and to express itself in deeds; but these deeds are not all summed up in the commonplace gift of a coin. Charity reaches far beyond; it gives itself free rein through a thousand devices, and, *by multiplying itself, it invents a remedy for every ill, a consolation for every sorrow*<sup>9</sup>. Follow it through the history of the past, and you will see that it *has always known how, by its countless works and institutions, to stir up in favour of the unfortunate a noble emulation of zeal, generosity and self-denial*<sup>10</sup>.

*Such is the only solution of the social question: it is the solution that was, for centuries, universally accepted*<sup>11</sup>. The Church held sway then, and she passed into the social body the divine virtue she holds from her Founder. Thanks to her, God was loved, and the love of God, transformed into love of neighbour, spread over all, but in particular over the unfortunate. The world lacks the Church: give her

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8. The Pope's address.

9. The Pope's address.

10. The Pope's address.

11. The Pope's address.

back her liberty, give her back her influence. But how could she be free and influential with her head a captive? If you wish to revive life in selfish societies, above all you must restore to the Pope the fullness of his liberty, by restoring to him the fullness of his sovereignty. You said it a moment ago, Monsignor<sup>12</sup>, with infinite competence and reason: “The social question is above all the question of the independence of the Papacy!” (Applause.)

Charity, gentlemen, when it spreads through souls, inclines them towards one another so as to draw them together and unite them. It completes its movement by organization. There is a moral organization just as there is a bodily organization. Just as in the body all the organs complete one another in the service of one and the same life, so in an association all the members, each in his place, exchange their services and lend one another mutual help.

Association is a necessity of the natural order: it is willed by God. Its purpose is to lend the support of the strong to weakness, and to guarantee to indigence the help of the wealthy. Woe to the man who is alone! “*Væ soli!*” This is true above all of the humble and the little ones; it is true also of the greatest, because, in order to enjoy their greatness, they need to turn it into kindness and to draw grateful hearts to themselves. (Applause.)

What then, gentlemen, is the obstacle to association, if not selfish passions? No association is possible without a certain constraint, without a measure of sacrifice; and the excessive craving for enjoyment, unleashed by original sin, protests against self-renunciation. The love of God, charity, is alone capable of reacting against excessive love of self. And since charity is one with the Christian life, the more Christian society becomes, the more the taste for association will develop. If modern society is dying of selfishness or individual-

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12. Mgr Cartuyvels, Rector of the University of Louvain.

ism, it is because it has denied Christ its Saviour and will not remember its baptism.

It is necessary, if we do not wish to die for good, to restore, together with charity, the life of association. That is why, the Holy Father tells us, *We ask that there be revived, at least in substance, in their beneficent and manifold virtue, and in such forms as the new conditions of the times may allow, those Guilds of arts and crafts which formerly provided for the material and religious needs of the workers*<sup>13</sup>.

And lest anyone be misled, and confuse with the Christian Corporations certain Corporations improvised outside the Church, without the soul of charity, without the driving force of the Christian life, the Pope takes care to add that *these Corporations must be informed by Christian thought and draw their inspiration from the motherly solicitude of the Church*<sup>14</sup>.

Will Catholics, gentlemen, remain deaf to this new call of the Vicar of Jesus Christ? He returns to it too insistently in his addresses and in his Encyclicals for us not to see in it a providential indication. The hour has therefore come to attempt a great effort, and to place an energetic will and a persevering ardour at the service of God in this direction. Our Christian employers of the Nord have entered upon this path, following a man who was the instigator of this movement, just as only yesterday he was the instigator of our pilgrimage: following Mr Léon Harmel. The movement is gaining strength at Armentières, at Douai, at Fourmies, at Lille, at Roubaix, at Tourcoing. It must continue and develop; it must spread, and soon, over the whole extent of our country, professional associations must be seen springing up under the name of mixed unions or Corporations. (Applause.)

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13. The Pope's address.

14. The Pope's address.

This, gentlemen, is the practical means of *restoring and consolidating, between employers and workers, that harmony and that union, which are the only safeguard of their reciprocal interests*<sup>15</sup>. The only safeguard! The only safeguard of the worker's interests just as much as of the employer's interest. There is therefore no question of overturning society under the pretext of reforming it. Unhappy those who, lending an ear to anarchist incitements, would think of *overthrowing what constitutes the very essence of political and civil society, of destroying property! They would run up against immutable laws, and, after heaping up ruins, they would only have aggravated their misery and drawn upon themselves the curses of honest souls!*<sup>16</sup>.

No, the Holy Father adds forcefully, the remedy does not lie in *subversive activities*, nor in *seductive and erroneous theories*. But where then is this so much desired remedy? Where it is, gentlemen, the Holy Father tells you with authority: *it lies wholly in the faithful fulfilment of the duties incumbent on all classes of society, in the respect and safeguarding of the functions and powers proper to each of them in particular*<sup>17</sup>.

The men of our time have not all forgotten the notion of duty; they have not all neglected its observance. Is it not true, nevertheless, that for far too many, duty stops at the limits of private life, or at most of domestic life? Who still thinks of social duty? We admire those who carry unselfishness so far as to forget themselves for the sake of others, above all for the sake of the unfortunate and the forsaken. It is not enough to admire what would be only a generous but optional impulse of the heart. It is urgent to awaken our conscience and to remember that we all owe ourselves to one another; that God wills the social order, as he wills the domestic order and the private order, and that he owes it to his honour to sanction it by a strict obligation.

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15. The Pope's address.

16. The Pope's address.

17. The Pope's address.

It is social duty, gentlemen, that the Pope recalls to us; and behold, by a striking contrast, the Church proclaims Duties in the face of civil society, which only yesterday was celebrating the declaration of Rights. The Revolution, a century ago, opened with that declaration its work of pride and reckless independence. We have seen the lamentable effects of that idolatrous revolt, and we are left wondering how to make firm again the ground shaken by so many upheavals. The means is to declare the rights of God by promulgating the duties of man; and that is what the head of the Church, the Vicar of Jesus Christ, is doing today.

To the ruling classes he recalls that they *must have a heart and bowels of compassion for those who earn their bread by the sweat of their brow, and that they must curb the insatiable desire for riches, luxury and pleasures*<sup>18</sup>.

To those who hold power he preaches the duty of *respecting the liberty of the Church and of furthering her influence*, the duty of *protecting youth, weakness and the wholly domestic mission of woman, and Sunday rest*<sup>19</sup>.

To employers he prescribes that they *regard the worker as a brother, ease his lot, watch over his interests, edify him by their example, and never depart, to his detriment and for the lure of gain, from the rules of equity and justice*<sup>20</sup>.

And to the worker, who, he too, has duties as well as rights, he recommends that he *practise his religious and domestic duties, accept his condition, respect his employer, and abstain from any act capable of disturbing public order and tranquillity*<sup>21</sup>.

Let each serve God by thus serving order in his own way, and soon, gentlemen, we shall have peace, since peace is the tranquillity

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18. The Pope's address.

19. The Pope's address.

20. The Pope's address.

21. The Pope's address.

of order. The reign of man has been for us nothing but a long servitude, the baneful source of dissensions and wars. It is time to return to the reign of God, and to experience at last, as it is written, that peoples are happy when they have God for their master!

Addressing his dear sons the workers, the Holy Father, after all his recommendations, added: *Preserve and nourish in your hearts feelings of gratitude and filial trust towards the Vicar of Jesus Christ, who does not cease and will never cease to watch over you as a Father, to inquire into your interests and to further them.* These words must be engraved on the memory of our workers; but they reach further, gentlemen, and we may all take them to heart.

Let us preserve, let us nourish feelings of gratitude and filial trust towards the Vicar of Jesus Christ. He is the father of our souls, our guide and our support. He struggles and suffers for us. Yet his heart, so deeply grieved, does not pour itself out in bitter complaints, and, in spite of the difficulties raised against him, he still has only words of praise for *that France where, despite individual and passing aberrations, the love of good has never been seen to wane, nor the flame of generosity and sacrifice to grow pale*<sup>22</sup>. Let us understand these delicate attentions of a truly fatherly love; and, since he invites us to it, French Catholics, let us remain ardent for good, generous even to sacrifice. Let all great causes find servants among us, and, if need be, martyrs; but among all those that call for our devotedness, may none ever be dearer to us than the holy cause of the Papacy! (Prolonged applause.)

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22. The Pope's address.

