

Catholic Association

OF THE EMPLOYERS

OF THE NORTH OF FRANCE

Roubaix Section

REPORT

ON THE

Visit of Mr Léon HARMEL

3, 4 and 5 MARCH 1888



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 1888 edition. It has been typeset in the spirit of the original: title pages and headings follow the layout of the book; the illustration has been cut out of the digitised document and restored.

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

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CATHOLIC ASSOCIATION
OF THE EMPLOYERS
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Roubaix Section

Visit of Mr Léon HARMEL

Gentlemen,

At the request of our Committee, Mr Léon Harmel was kind enough to devote to Roubaix almost three days of his very full life.

Everywhere we heard him expound his great thesis of social duty seen from the Christian point of view, and strive to pass on to every heart the ardour of his charity. We must keep the memory of it and profit from his great examples.

On the Saturday evening, 3 March, the Committee of the Association of Catholic Workers' Circles, meeting under the chairmanship of Mr Louis Scrépel-Chrétien, had the honour of being the first to welcome him.

Mr Louis Scrépel-Chrétien gave him an account of the situation of the Catholic Circles in Roubaix and asked him what, in his opinion, their role was in the change now under way, which tends to group the Christian workers no longer by Circles but by factory, under the direction of their employers, until these workshop groups can be gathered into a single body in the form of a mixed union, or rather, of a Christian corporation.

Mr Harmel replied that the role of the Catholic Circles in Roubaix was clearly marked out by their past; that they had served to gather the first elements of the work of Christian regeneration now taking place in the factories; that they would now place themselves at the service of the nascent corporations, to provide them with meeting

places where Christian employers and workers could meet elsewhere than on the ground of the workshop; and that this corporative life would give the Catholic Circles new vigour.

In support of Mr Harmel's words, Mr H. Bayart observed that the Confraternity of Our Lady of the Factory (Notre-Dame de l'Usine) had already been established in one of the Circles of the town, to gather there the workers who did not belong to workshops where the Confraternity had been set up; that this was a necessary complement to our organisation, and a powerful means of reaching the workshops not yet officially won over to us.

A new horizon thus opens for the activity of the members of the Association of Catholic Workers' Circles, who are happy to see, after long years of perseverance, the Christian reform of labour taking place, and the dawn breaking of the restoration of corporations formed with the full consent of the parties concerned, subject to the authority of the Church and suited to the needs of present times.

The next day, 4 March, Mr Léon Harmel began his apostolic rounds with a talk given at half past nine to the oldest pupils of the Collège de Roubaix. For the young men who are later to enter industry must know their duties early and learn to prepare themselves to fulfil them well.

At eleven o'clock, in one of the halls belonging to the church of Notre-Dame, the first general meeting of the dizainiers (leaders of ten) of the Confraternity of Our Lady of the Factory took place. There were from 90 to 100 of them.

The Dean of Notre-Dame, director of the Confraternity, introduced Mr Harmel to this elite of the workers of Roubaix and gave him the floor.

In noble and moving language, Mr Harmel set out for these future apostles of the factory the line of conduct they should follow. He gave them as their example and model the divine Worker of Nazareth and, showing them the spiritual and temporal misery of their brothers,

brought out the whole greatness of the mission that had fallen to them. God, he told them, has commanded us to concern ourselves with our neighbour. We are not allowed to be indifferent to him, and you must thank God for having thus enabled you to work for his glory; for your employers, for all their good will, can do nothing without your help to bring the workers they employ back to Christian life and so ensure the morality of their factories. Living in the midst of your workmates, you can without effort work each day effectively for their conversion, and by acting in this way you will ensure your own salvation. He then spoke to them of Val-des-Bois, and of the fine examples of virtue given there by the Christian workers. He told them that their mission was wholly one of charity and justice, and that they need not fear being suspected of informing; that they would never be asked to give an account of the conduct of their workmates, and that they would only have to examine themselves on the good they themselves might have done them. And he ended by exhorting them to persevere, and by handing out copies of his pamphlet on workshop delegates, which sums up the duties of good leaders of ten, or delegates.

Such, more or less, were his words; but what we cannot convey is the tone of faith and trust in God with which they were spoken, and the deep impression they made on his audience, which hung on his lips, as it were, and saw opening before it a whole world, new, alas, to it, as it is to ourselves: the world of Christian labour, which, restoring all things according to the order willed by God, will turn the workshop into an instrument as powerful for good as it now is for evil, and will save society, if it please God, from the catastrophe towards which modern materialism is driving it.

At four o'clock, in the same premises, the women leaders of ten and candidate women leaders of ten, about eighty in number, were called in their turn to hear Mr Harmel, who likewise initiated them into their new and important duties.

He painted for them a strikingly true picture of the role that woman has been called by God to play on earth. He presented her as the very pivot of the struggle waged until the end of time between good and evil, between God and Satan.

He showed her falling with Eve and dragging mankind down in her fall, and becoming herself a slave and a mere instrument of pleasure as the particular punishment of her fault; then rising again gloriously, sharing in the redemption of mankind in the person of Mary, and regaining, together with her freedom, her influence in the world. But this influence, so great, which her sacred titles of wife and mother give her in Christian society, rests on her honour and her virtue, which she must always keep beyond the slightest suspicion: for the world, so indulgent towards the vices of man, is pitiless towards the faults of woman, and when she falls she is dishonoured for life. That is why the Church has surrounded woman with her most watchful protection, and everything has been done by the Church to save her, just as everything has been done by Hell to ruin her.

And even now, what is the principal aim of the new work undertaken, if not first of all to safeguard the weakness of woman against the new perils that have come to assail her as a result of the transformation of industry?

Christian women workers, he told them, rally then under the banner of Mary, and take her as your model: begin by giving your companions the example of modesty and virtue; be kind and friendly to them, and when you have thus won their affection and their trust, the rest will become easy. Be faithful to prayer, moreover: ask Mary for the grace of perseverance, and success will crown your efforts.

Mr Harmel then left this audience, deeply moved by the words it had just heard and fully disposed to walk in the path marked out for it, and went to the college, where Abbé Jean-Baptiste Ghesquière presented to him a group of young men gathered under his direction into a section of the Catholic Association of French Youth. Mr

Schvarz, president of the Association, gave Mr Harmel an account of the literary work of the members and consulted him on the direction to give to these studies. In a conversation full of Christian cordiality, Mr Harmel congratulated them on their initiative and encouraged them to direct their efforts above all towards the study of social questions, and to place themselves personally at the service of the works for workers now being formed.

From there Mr Harmel, truly tireless, went to the Concorde Circle, where a large meeting of Roubaix clerks awaited him, arranged by the care of Abbé Delesalle, curate of Saint-Martin and director of the Concorde Circle. There were from four to five hundred of them, and they belonged to every rank of the industrial hierarchy.

The Dean of Saint-Martin opened the meeting with a few very happy words addressed to Mr Léon Harmel, who then developed, with the eloquence that deep conviction gives, this great thought: that authority is a good which comes from God, and that it belongs not so much to the one who exercises it as to the one over whom it is exercised; for the worker, he said, has a right to the benefits that flow from its exercise when the employer to whom it is entrusted understands and fulfils his duty.

Now in most cases the employer does not exercise this authority personally: he delegates it to his clerks, who, while thus sharing in his rights, must also share in his duties.

They must therefore watch over their subordinates as far as possible and concern themselves with their moral and material interests. Having come from the ranks of the people, to whom they remain attached by many natural ties, they must understand better than anyone the complaints of the worker about the state of abandonment in which the present organisation of labour leaves him. They will therefore make it their concern to exercise their authority not only with justice but with charity, and to use their legitimate influence to persuade honest workers to gather around their employers under the

banner of Our Lady of the Factory. And let them not fear that by acting in this way, by contributing to the so necessary rapprochement of employer and worker, they will lessen their personal authority; for they will themselves reap the first benefits of this Christian organisation of the factory, seeing reborn between themselves and their subordinates a cordiality of relations of which they have lost all memory, so that the exercise of their authority will become as pleasant and easy as it is now often the occasion of painful clashes.

This remarkable talk, of which we regret being able to retrace only the main lines, was interrupted several times by unanimous applause, and the Dean of Saint-Martin spoke for all when he thanked Mr Léon Harmel with all his heart for this new manifestation of his apostolic devotedness to the working class. He added, amid the applause of the assembly, that his words would bear fruit, and that Roubaix, without claiming to achieve the wonders of Val-des-Bois, will nevertheless walk in the way of works for workers, in the hope that, with God's help, the application of the same principles will likewise lead to important results.

On the Monday morning, 5 March, an unexpected circumstance prevented a planned meeting from taking place. Mr Harmel, thus left free, spent his morning in Tourcoing; but he would not allow that meeting to be cancelled on that account and, sustained by admirable zeal, he gave four talks in succession in the afternoon.

He spoke first, at three o'clock, to the ladies of the town, a hundred and twenty of whom had been gathered at the convent of the Sainte-Union by the care of the Dean of Saint-Martin. He urged them to join the movement for the Christian regeneration of the factories, and even to take the lead in it. He showed them what their role was, what a happy influence they could and should exert on their husbands and their sons; how, above all, they should make it their concern to look after the factory women workers, so neglected, exposed today to so many perils, and who nevertheless had a legitimate right to count

on the protection and Christian charity of the wives of their employers. It was to them that the mission belonged of watching over the honour of their sex, after the example of Mary, their mother and their model.

In the Confraternity of Our Lady of the Factory, the employers' wives are called to guide the women leaders of ten in the exercise of their duties, just as the women leaders of ten have the mission of watching over their companions. By taking an interest in the women leaders of ten, by talking with them privately, they will learn facts about the situation of factory women workers that will make them shudder, and they will not wish to let souls perish that are entrusted to their care, and that a little supervision and good will can so easily bring back to God: "A door opened or closed at one hour rather than another can be the occasion of the salvation or the ruin of your women workers. You must therefore, he told them, take an interest in these details, which your husbands or your sons, absorbed by the cares of business, cannot follow; and in fulfilling your duty you will have the consciousness of having been God's instrument for saving the souls of your women workers."

Abbé Fichaux then spoke, to recommend to the ladies who wished to enter the path Mr Harmel was marking out for them that they get in touch with the Little Sisters of the Worker, established only recently and still unknown in Roubaix, but who for years now have been rendering the greatest services in Tourcoing. They will find in them a very great support: they will profit from the lessons of their experience and so succeed in doing good from the very start; for zeal is not enough: this zeal must be enlightened and guided. And who could better serve as an example and a guide to the ladies of Roubaix than these holy women who have devoted themselves to the service of the suffering members of Jesus Christ in the person of the workshop workers? They have the graces of their state, no one could doubt it: it

is to them, therefore, as to natural auxiliaries, that the employers' wives should turn.

This talk made a deep impression, and we have the hope of seeing an increase in the number of employers' wives who have already courageously set to work among their women workers. Why, then, should an association of employers' wives not be formed, to gather together all the good will and to pool the efforts and experience of each of them?

Mr Harmel then went on to a meeting of the clergy arranged by the care of the Dean of Saint-Martin, and discussed with our clergy, ever so zealous, the measures best suited to promoting Catholic works and works for workers; but he had to cut short the conversation because the pitiless hour called him to a meeting of Christian employers, forty to fifty of whom were waiting for him at the Ozanam circle.

The Dean of Notre-Dame, director of the Confraternity of Our Lady of the Factory, spoke first to thank Mr Harmel for the generous help he was bringing to the foundation of this great work in Roubaix; then he made a warm appeal to the industrialists present: "The harvest is ripe," he said, "and awaits the sickle. We must not, for the sake of a few ears still green, delay gathering in the good grain, which might be scattered by the wind: let those of you who have not yet definitively set up the Confraternity in their works delay no longer: we are entirely at their disposal, as are our venerable brother priests, to proceed to its installation, and we are eager to see the Confraternity begin its regular functioning."

Mr Léon Harmel then spoke. He first congratulated the employers of Roubaix on having established their first associations with their workers in a religious form, and urged them always to remain faithfully submissive to the direction of the clergy, who alone are qualified to guide us in Catholic works.

If you had begun, he told them, on economic ground, you would have failed like so many others; but God will be with you because you have placed yourselves under the all-powerful protection of Mary Immaculate. Never let your Association leave this path, then; let it always be, above all, religious in its essence, and the rest will be given to us besides. No doubt we must concern ourselves with economic institutions: the worker expects you to concern yourselves with his material needs as well as with his spiritual needs; but for the worker, more than for anyone else, there is a close connection between the practice of the Christian virtues and comfort, just as there is between vice and poverty, and if you want his happiness you must see first of all to making him moral and religious. At Val-des-Bois the workers now save 60,000 fr. a year, that is, 10 to 11 per cent of their wages, whereas before they joined religious associations they were generally in debt.

Only joint works, he told us, are possible under the conditions in which your industry is carried on; you will therefore shortly be led to form yourselves, in order to organise them, into a Christian corporation in the legal form of a mixed union.

This is a great and useful undertaking, and one that may have very important and very happy consequences from the social point of view; but your duty is to see to it that this force, which may become very considerable, never strays from its original direction, and cannot fall into the hands of the enemies of Christian society and be turned against you.

I therefore urge you to take care over the sound composition of your board of management, and not to leave it at the mercy of elections held too often. It would be preferable, in my opinion, for each workshop to form a separate union, and for a combination of these unions then to be formed, a kind of council in which each workshop would be represented by one employer and one worker, so that there

would be changes only when a syndic, worker or employer, came to leave the workshop he represented on the council.

Passing then to the economic works that might be founded in Roubaix, he advised that institutions should be organised there as soon as possible, either in the form of cooperative societies or, to begin with, by simply coming to an arrangement with approved suppliers who would agree to give our members a discount on their purchases in return for cash payment, institutions that would accustom our workers to this cash payment, the only means for the worker to manage to save. And he pointed out a very simple and very ingenious method of collecting the agreed discount from the approved suppliers. It consists in this: the suppliers must come to the seat of the Association to obtain a token currency, which is issued to them only on payment of the agreed discount; that is to say, if they are to grant a discount of 5 per cent, they must pay 5 francs to obtain a hundred francs' worth of tokens. Then the customers who are members of the Corporation, when paying the suppliers, ask them for tokens to the value of their purchases. These tokens, handed in by them to the Association's accountant, make it possible to keep their individual accounts.

In closing, Mr Harmel drew the kind attention of the employers present quite particularly to the serious question of the dismissal of workers.

In no case, he said, must this right of dismissal be left in the hands of subordinate clerks, who, even setting aside possible cases of abuse, are liable to pronounce these dismissals in a moment of irritation, without sufficiently weighing the consequences of their acts: yet what is at stake is very often the livelihood of poor workers with families to support. It is to the employer, or failing him to the manager, that the right of dismissal must be reserved.

On behalf of the employers present, Mr H. Bayart thanked Mr Léon Harmel for his wise advice, which all will make it their concern

to put into practice, and the meeting was closed, as it had begun, with the customary prayer.

Mr Léon Harmel had thus set out his views in turn to groups belonging to every rank of the industrial hierarchy, employers, employers' wives, clerks, a Catholic association of young men, as well as to the men and women leaders of ten, who are, as it were, the corps of non-commissioned officers of the Christian army of Labour, and had striven to pass on to each of them his admirable zeal for the salvation of the working class. It remained for him, before leaving us, to address the workers themselves, so as to make them too understand what the Confraternity of Our Lady of the Factory was, and all the moral and material good that would flow from it for them.

Scorning fatigue, he therefore went at half past eight in the evening to a workers' meeting that had been arranged at the St Joseph circle, rue de la Paix. Twelve hundred workers, members of the Confraternity of Our Lady of the Factory or belonging to the Catholic Circles, crowded into a hall that could comfortably have held only eight to nine hundred, and about two hundred had been unable to find a place, such an attendance having exceeded the expectations of the organising committee.

Warm applause broke out as he came in: the people of Roubaix recognised and greeted in him the best of their friends. Mr Léon Harmel, visibly touched by this welcome, found in his heart new accents to set out for them what he had already repeated so many times: the necessity of the Christian organisation of labour, the means of putting it into practice, and the advantages of every kind that would result from it for the workers.

He made them understand that they absolutely had to leave the state of isolation in which they had lived until now; that this isolation was the real cause of the evil that arose in the workshops; that the Christian workers must gather around their employers, so as to make the workshop a kind of vast family, and that in this way they would

form a moral force that would bring to nothing the influence often usurped by a few agitators without principles or conduct. The Christian worker would regain the freedom to do good, which at present no longer exists; thanks to the Confraternity he could work for the conversion of his brothers, for the salvation of his workmates, and so gain heaven, that supreme goal of our efforts on earth.

The workshop, he told them, is too often the vestibule of hell; through the practice of the Christian virtues it must become, as it were, the road to paradise. But how are these associations to be formed? Are the workers now to be compelled to join the Confraternity of Our Lady of the Factory? Far be from us that thought, which is not Christian. Freedom is the daughter of heaven: it is a precious and inalienable good which no one would wish to touch.

The Confraternity is open to all Christian workers: one joins it and leaves it freely. It will live and spread, if it please God, through the will of the workers themselves. For what is its basis of action, if not the apostolate of the worker to the worker, a fruitful apostolate which has transformed Val-des-Bois and has called forth there among the working class a thousand acts of true Christian heroism, and which has produced the same results wherever this principle has been put into practice?

Workers of Roubaix, he told them, I congratulate you on thus beginning your first associations on religious ground, under the direction of your employers: I see in it a sure pledge of success. When Christian employers and workers have learnt to know and esteem one another, when they have lived as fellow members, it will be easy to create among them economic or provident works, managed jointly by the workers and the employers: that will be the material reward of your efforts to restore Christian life in the workshops; but before everything else this Christian life must be restored. And so, he added, I will not speak to you today of many works which would nevertheless interest you and which have considerably improved the living

conditions of the workers of Val-des-Bois: that will be for my next visit, when I shall find, I hope, the Confraternity of Our Lady of the Factory in full working order in all your workshops.

Mr Harmel then recalled with emotion the still vivid memories of the pilgrimage to Rome, and powerfully brought before our workers the great figure of His Holiness Leo XIII, who in his fatherly solicitude urges the world of labour to enter, for its salvation, on the path of associations based on the religious spirit, and to revive the Christian corporations.

The workers' pilgrimage, he said, was a great consolation for Leo XIII: we want to return to Rome next year, but this time we want to be ten thousand, so that all the Christian workshops of France may be amply represented in this great and patriotic demonstration.

He ended by insisting on the necessity of perseverance and of prayer, which alone ensures success.

These great teachings were heard with the most sympathetic attention by his large audience, which did not stint its applause; but this applause redoubled when Mr H. Bayart, thanking Mr Harmel on behalf of the Roubaix Committee, revealed to all these good workers all the labours that this apostle of the factory had taken upon himself for them over the past two days, and quickly went over all the meetings he had called, and how he had everywhere pleaded their cause and spent himself for them, so that it would be enough for us in Roubaix to imitate his example, even from afar, to see our work succeed beyond our hopes; and the meeting was closed amid a true ovation for Mr Léon Harmel.

Such were these fruitful days, in which, for us as for our workers, the greatest lesson of all was that of the admirable zeal shown by Mr Harmel for the salvation of souls.

Listening to him, we also understood better the necessity, in a work as considerable, but also, let us say it without hesitation, as difficult as the one we have undertaken under the protection of Mary

Immaculate, of securing the help of every devoted person. We must therefore, gentlemen, support with all our power the formation of associations of employers' wives, of clerks, of Christian young men, which come to complete our action and make it truly effective on religious as well as on social ground: for this common effort, this union of all Christian forces, alone can ensure our success and lead to the restoration of a social order based on the unchanging principles of justice and Christian charity.

