

THE INSTITUTE

AND THE ORIGINS OF THE

J.O.C. (YOUNG CHRISTIAN WORKERS) - (1)

I was led to write this article after reading the fascinating book by Pierre Pierrard on "The Church and the Workers in France" (1840-1940), and more especially, the long chapter on "militant anticlericalism" from 1891 to 1914. The author was able to give a very well documented account of the use of the press, almanacs and songs for propaganda purposes, forming public opinion among the masses all the more easily as it fitted in with a situation in which the sufferings and revolt of the poor found no answer in the Church. This Church, seemingly unaware of the growing movement among the working classes to stand up and be counted, was identified with the various forces that oppressed the workers. There occurred at the time, of course, a fortunate and major event, the publication on February 16th 1882 of the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in which Pope Leo XIII spoke of the conditions of the workers. However, in France at least, this first solemn declaration on a social question was interpreted in a variety of ways, coloured for the most part by a complex political scene and the unwillingness of many Catholics to come to the rescue of the Republic.

Pierrard reacts to this rising tide of anticlericalism by highlighting examples of a positive response, however restricted, to the words of the Pope by a number of small groups like, for example, the Christian Democrats, Christian Workers Congresses, Social Secretariats, the A.C.J.F., the Sillon and so on. What they did was good and interesting, but it was more or less similar to the work the leaders of these groups were already doing to help the young in need. Even when there was founded the first "Christian Shop Assistants and Factory Workers Trades Union" also called the "Petits Carreaux", it is Brother Hieron of the Brothers of the Christian Schools who was considered to be its founder, because, in 1887, he grouped together 18 young employees from a variety of youth clubs in Paris where they were being given moral and material help as well as some vocational training.

However, with regard to all this, reality is much more complex and in particular shows that evangelisation is a very long process. The JOC has its roots firmly planted not only in the working class, but also in the spiritual ministry which the Church, whatever its human limitations, has never ceased exercising among the insignificant of this world. There is a sort of "pre-history" of the JOC which most people are ignorant of.

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To get to know about it, you have to go back to the first half of the 19th century, a time when our country was in the throes of the industrial revolution.

At that time, many young people were sent up to Paris from predominantly Catholic areas of the country. These young people came from large peasant families who did not own enough land to provide work for their offspring. And so, they "went up" to Paris to work as servants, in workshops, as clerks (a type of work in limited demand), or doing anything at all, however menial. Used to a hard life, they worked hard, saved money, led a life of probity based on Gospel values. The women were good housewives, and when they married a young man who also had "come up" to Paris, they could be counted upon to look after the family income and see to their children's education.

Of course, once they had become town-dwellers properly so called, many abandoned the practice of their faith and let themselves be carried away on the tide of anticlericalism, endemic in working class districts. However, the kind of work they did was looked down upon by the industrial workers, and this helped ancestral traditions to survive. And so they willingly sent their children to Christian clubs so that they would be "protected" and brought up in the same way as they had been.

As early as 1843, at the request of Armand de Melun and Brother Philippe, Superior General of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, a youth "club" was set up at the St. Margaret primary school (11th arrondissement) run by the De La Salle Brothers. This "club" had as its aim to offer adolescents a chance to continue to benefit from the salutary influence of the school: the first "patronage" was born. Others were soon to follow, so much so that, by 1879 in the Paris area there were 23 clubs attached to Brothers' schools, catering for 3,500 adolescents and young people. When in May 1882 there took place at the Pensionnat de Passy a General Pastoral Assembly, it was to this large group of young people that Brother Exuperien, Assistant General, and as such in charge of Youth Clubs, referred when speaking to the chaplain of the Mother House, Fr. Chaumont: "There must be among those attending this assembly a great many who could be transformed into real apostles by some sort of training which is more intense than that of the clubs. We must discover who these young people are, form them into a group, train them and use them to improve our pastoral work".

There was a prophetic quality about these words: by the month of June of the same year, the support of a priest of known spiritual acumen combined with the energy of a dedicated Brother had brought together 21 young people specially chosen by the Brothers running the various clubs.

From that time onwards right up to the 1920-1930 period, the movement was supported from two quarters: by the Brothers and by the diocesan authorities who appointed a priest from Paris as director. These young people who had been picked out, it is true, but who were over 20 years of age, were from the start the real founders of their group. It was one of them who suggested their patron saint should be Benedict Joseph Labre, the last Frenchman to be canonised and known as the “beggar saint”. The most striking thing was that they accepted willingly the demanding spiritual dimension their mentors had wished on them: the practice of their faith enshrined in a rule of life, hardly distinguishable from that of religious life in its programme of spiritual exercises: daily prayer, frequent reception of the sacraments, recollection, retreats, spiritual direction... What is extraordinary is the acceptance of this spiritual dimension.

On October 8th 1882, the 21 members of the St. Labre group met together, prayed, had a meal and proceeded to examine the 16 resolutions which they then promised to keep faithfully. Subsequently they went to check in situ the various groups that had been formed locally in each of the local clubs –the first fruits. In 1888 the number of members had risen to 550; and by 1897 they numbered 900, of whom 400 had made their annual retreat at the Brothers’ house at Athis Mons. The dynamism of this movement would bear fruit also on the social plane.

Its most well known achievement was the General Assembly which on September 13th 1887 set up the Christian Shop Assistants and Factory Workers Trades Union, continuing the work of the Employment Exchange Committee which with the active support of Brother Hieron had been functioning at 14 rue des Petits Carreaux since 1883. The minutes of the meeting entered into the register of the new organisation give the names of 17 of its young founders who were present, who all belonged to the Society of St. Labre and who would watch over its steady growth till 1919 which saw the birth of the CFTC (French Confederation of Christian Workers). Those were 30 years of hard struggle marked by the cold indifference of Workers’ Organisations towards a trades union group including not only manual workers, and which dared advertise a religious affiliation. Its leaders, the Zirnhelds, the Despots, the Viennets, the Teissiers to name just a few, continued all that time to draw their spiritual energy from the ideals that originally inspired them.

The dynamism of the St. Labre Association was felt also in other areas such as the “youth sections” of the St. Vincent de Paul Society (250 members and 29 teams in 1894), or the Support Groups of the clubs. By a process which bore witness to the depth of the spiritual foundations of the movement, there appeared a sign of astonishing vitality: this organisation to help young workers from families of modest means and with a minimal education to persevere in the faith, while developing in most of its members an apostolic outlook and the will to win back their brother workers to the faith, became also a rich source of “late” vocations, which was quite extraordinary for a time when becoming a priest meant studying the classics.

A typical example is Charles Fichaux who, for 34 years (1910-44), was the priest-in-charge, or rather the dynamic organiser of the whole St. Labre movement.

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Charles Fichaux was born in 1869. His father was an agricultural worker from the rolling plains of the Soissons area who died in the 1870 War. His mother died when he was 7, and the nuns who ran the Hotel Dieu de St. Quentin accepted him into their orphanage. Here he found a new family, deep religious convictions and was given a solid primary education up to the age of 13. For the next 4 years, however, the young Charles was given no vocational training. In 1886, he “went up” to Paris and, thanks to the help of a friend, was given an unskilled job in a shop selling ties. He found lodgings near St. Pierre de Montmartre and joined the parish club. In 1887, he joined the St. Labre Association and became a very fervent member. He quickly came to the attention of Father Paguette de Fontenay, who was in charge at the time and who noticed the depth of his religious convictions. However, it never occurred to this holy priest who was a close collaborator of Mgr. d’Hulst at the Institut Catholique, that this young uneducated man might have a vocation to the priesthood. It was while Charles was doing 8 months military service with the Light Infantry Battalion at St. Nicolas de Port that the question of the priesthood was broached to him by the chaplain, a question his innate modesty would have prevented him from considering.

In 1891, he joined the junior seminary of Notre Dame des Champs, and there he was, a young adult, 22 years old, alone in a class of third years. For 4 years he struggled with them to learn Latin, but he never mastered it properly. The following 4 years in the major seminary of St. Sulpice in Paris were no less demanding. However, the prayers and his studies made him ever more determined to answer God’s call. On December 23rd 1899, at the age of 30, he was ordained and appointed chaplain at the Brothers’ school of St. Nicolas d’Issy, a boarding school which catered for children from poor families and broken homes. It took him very little time to feel at home in a social setting that was very much his own. In the meantime, he continued to support now as a priest the Association in which he had grown up as a layman. In 1905, when religious Congregations were suppressed, many Brothers of the Christian Schools left and the St. Labre groups lost much of their dynamism. Prompted solely by his concern for the Association to which he owed so much, Father Fichaux volunteered his services to Mgr. Amette, the new Archbishop of Paris. And so, in 1908, while continuing to work at St. Nicolas, he was appointed second in command. In 1910, the diocesan authorities relieved him of all other work, to the delight of the young people who appreciated so much the apostolic zeal of this priest who had risen from their ranks.

In his letter of appointment, the Cardinal made a remark which was to prove prophetic: “I am giving you your Father Fichaux on condition you send me one day a hundred little Father Fichaux!” Their side of the bargain was easily kept as, 30 years later, in 1939, in spite of the cruel blood-letting of the War, 160 priests (of whom 3 became bishops) said they owed their vocation in one way or another to the work of fostering priestly vocations undertaken by the Director of the St. Labre Association.

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