

# BLACKFRIARS

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## CHRIST THE WORKER

Self-consciousness is one of the most dangerous characteristics of the modern age. The self-conscious car driver fixes his attention on himself as driving rather than on driving, the self-conscious eater thinks less of the meal than of the critical gaze of others. To be conscious of self in this way is always hazardous to the work in hand. Moreover this spirit makes itself felt particularly in the different categories of society. Class distinction has led to self-consciousness in the community. The 'working classes' in these days have learnt to regard themselves as 'workers' distinct from and even opposed to all other classes in a way different even from that known to medieval serf or classical slave. Any movement that tends to increase this consciousness must therefore lead to separation and civil strife.

For this reason many people are suspicious of a new devotion to Christ 'the Worker.' Instead of teaching those who labour in workshop, factory or office the objective reality of our Lord as the Saviour of *all* mankind, the devotion may seem to foster self-consciousness by giving them a crabbed view of Christ as one who is on their side against the rest of the world. The Christian Guilds were content with a special Patron Saint, they did not try to divide Christ in this way. No one has yet tried to stir up enthusiasm for Christ the Employer of the Apostles. But where are we going to draw the line in our application of different aspects of Christ to the self-conscious groupings of society?

These are dangers which demand vigilance, but the devotion aims precisely at overcoming this self-consciousness and submerging the sense of class in the new life of Christ's Mystical Body. The foundations upon which it is built are both natural and supernatural. In the first place, the term 'worker' is an honourable title that should be applied to every rank of society, as is clear from Fr. Vann's article. At least since the Fall work has always been an integral part of human life. For that reason it plays an integral part in the doctrine of the Incarnation. The Saviour was alike to us in all things, save

only regarding sin; he could have come as a superman riding superior to the toils of human life, perfect in every way. The devil conjectured that the true Son of God would be independent of the exigencies of human life as it now is under the bondage of sin—'If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread.' There are quaint infancy stories that picture our Lord making live sparrows out of clay; they are, however, apocryphal and do not conform to the scheme of the nature and purpose of the Incarnation. As a young man, he did not sit by while his saw cut the beam; in his ministry, his journeys through the land were laborious and wearisome. The Son of God came on earth as a worker to be an example to all.

The present limitation of the word 'worker' and the consequent misunderstanding of the significance of Christ the Carpenter of Nazareth seems largely due to the modern misconception regarding the place of work in human life. To-day labour of any kind is regarded as an unmitigated burden to be avoided whenever possible. Leisure is the ideal state. Machines are to take the place of human labour and men are to be free to do as they will, to do anything, in fact, except work. There are many who forget that leisure is a negation, an absence of occupation, while those who do recognise some danger in leisure for leisure's sake imagine that all abuses can be avoided by education, by teaching men how to use their leisure.

Rather should people be educated for their work, on condition, of course, that their work is not sinful nor contributing to an unjust social state. St. Thomas's view of manual labour is illuminating in this respect. It has, he teaches, four purposes: first and principally it is ordained to earning a livelihood. But secondly it is directed to removing '*otium*' (which may be translated *leisure*) because this idleness or leisure is the cause of many evils. Then it is also a means of overcoming concupiscence and of acquiring a sufficiency from which one can give alms (*cf.* 2a, 2ae, quest. 187, art. 3). If we take work more universally, then, applying the word to every occupation requiring energy and application and ordained in some way to the common good of society, we can maintain that it is always necessary in order to avoid harmful leisure. Then the relevance of Christ the Worker becomes at once apparent—the model of all who would work for their salvation. He can unite the labour of all sections of the community to his own travail, thereby turning their work into a sacrifice offered for the glory of God and the redemption of man.

Yet the immediate purpose of the devotion to Christ the Worker is to recall the masses who spend their lives in factories, docks, offices—in fact, those who are called by non-Christians the proletariat—back to Christian faith and practice. The paganism of so many

of the people has at last been realised by the more conscientious Christians, who remain, however, at a loss how to set about the immense task of reclaiming them. There is a growing insistence that the Christian should work back to a common ground of agreement with the pagan worker and rebuild the Christian view on that foundation. Robert Walsh, late editor of the *Catholic Worker*, shows how valuable such a line of approach can be with the Communists, and much time has been spent by active societies such as The Sword of the Spirit on the question of Natural Law as the basis for collaborating towards a Christian society.

Caution, however, is to be recommended in this search for a common ground. We must remember that the truths the Christian holds in common with others are not themselves specifically Christian. You may convince the neopagan of the imperative need of following the natural law, but that does not mean you have brought him nearer the Christian ideal of work or property. He may in fact be quite content with the natural ordering of society. Indeed such agreement on natural principles may lead the Christian to treat his faith as a means to the establishment of a sound social order in the world. Mr. C. S. Lewis, in a book that reveals many such fallacies in an entertaining way, points out this danger by putting forward the devil's point of view: 'We (the devils) do want, and want very much, to make men treat Christianity as a means; preferably, of course, as a means to their own advancement, but, failing that, as a means to anything—even to social justice . . . Men or nations who think they can revive the Faith in order to make a good society might just as well think they can use the stairs of Heaven as a short cut to the nearest chemist's shop . . . Only to-day I have found a passage in a Christian writer where he recommends his own version of Christianity on the ground that "only such a faith can outlast the death of old cultures and the birth of new civilisations"' (*The Screwtape Letters*, pp. 119—120). If that is the purpose of seeking common ground with other social orders in the natural law to which all may agree, our Christian order is doomed.

An example of this attitude may be found in a pamphlet on the Anglican counterpart of the J.O.C. or Y.C.W. (*How to begin a Section of the Christian Workers' Union*, S.P.C.K., 3d.). We do not criticize this movement in general, or join with the few who adopt the Tom-Tiddler's-Ground manner and resent a Catholic thing being expressly copied by the Anglican Church. But we would advise a restatement of its aims which, as they stand, are concerned solely with the dignity of work and conclude, 'By Observation, Prayer, and Action to plan for the steady progress in the conditions

and standards of work.' We must insist that prayer and sacrifice are primarily not concerned to relieve the dreary lot of the worker, but to redeem sin, purchase eternal life and above all to give honour and praise to God.

Any other way than that of Christian self-denial and supernatural love of God will not lead the worker back to Christ. If we constantly present the Christian ethic as a natural code based solely on Aristotelian thought, we shall be advertising an abstract theory that competes with Socialism, Communism, Nationalism in the same order of ideals. Do we expect every individual to sit down and study the rival claims of these bookish social theories? People either will not or cannot plunge into such intellectual intricacies. Are we presenting the Christian social doctrine as a rival to these other *-isms*, as in an electioneering campaign? Christianity, the Kingdom which is not of this world, will not stand much chance against those who promise *all* a three-roomed flat, a car, a radiogramophone, and very little of this accursed work.

The true Christian has no rival in the social sphere; he does not compete with any other political or economic party. His message of hope centres in a higher order altogether, for he preaches, not an abstract theory of social justice, but a real, concrete, divine Person, who is at the same time a man and a Society. This is where the devotion to Christ the Worker comes in as the dynamic centre of the Christian apostolate to the workers of the world. Workers of the world, unite; not in a State, an international Commune, an intangible ghost fashioned by men's minds, but in the Body of Christ who is the Worker. His work at Nazareth was the laborious occupation of the carpenter and the rabbinical student, but that was only a small part of a single work in which he was engaged through every instant of his life. That was the work his Father had sent him to do, the work of salvation. And he continues this work in his Mystical Body. His followers become his collaborators in this occupation, continuing his mission in the same way. United to their Head, the Principal Worker, the labourers of all callings become so 'oned' that class distinction in an organisation gives place to a distinction of function in an organism living for a unique purpose. Every action performed in factory, office, lecture-hall or playing-field plays its part in the united effort to redeem mankind and give praise to God.

Workers of the world, unite in Christ, who alone is the Worker of eternal happiness!