

THE IDEALISM OF THE Y. C. W.

IN discussing the idealism of the Y.C.W. I am taking a great deal for granted. I am taking it as a proven fact that the conditions in which many of our young people to-day are forced to earn their daily bread are very often, if not usually, diametrically opposed to the ideals of the Christian Gospel. I am also taking it as an assumption that every real Christian will admit the necessity of some form of organized apostolate within the Church to cater for the Young Christian Worker in these anti-spiritual, anti-Christian conditions. Now the Y.C.W. movement claims to cater for this need and can claim a large measure of success in Belgium, France and elsewhere. I put forward here some brief outline of the ideals which have guided the founder of the Movement, Canon Cardijn, ideals which he has expressed many times, ideals which are their own commendation.

We commence with two principles: the first, that all Young Christian Workers must be missionaries of their milieu, missionaries, that is, in their ordinary surroundings, in the ordinary atmosphere of the workshop, but, above all, missionaries who give a religious soul to every act of their life: and the second, that there is no external means of caring for the Young Worker at the present day. With regard to the first principle, note that I insist on the interior formation of the apostle, for the interior life is a source of activity of itself and in itself to which no other can be compared. We recall the words of the incomparable Bossuet: 'Hands raised aloft in prayer smash more battalions than hands which strike.' Yes, the inner life of the young apostle must be the branch filled with strong sap, of which his external works are but the flowers. 'Before allowing his tongue to speak,' says St. Augustine, 'the

apostle must raise his thirsting soul to God, and then give forth what he has drunk in and pour forth that with which he has been filled.'

The second principle needs little expansion. There is no *external* means of catering for the mass of young workers, of the workers who most need assistance and help, the workers from 14 to 25 years of age. There is no external means, I say; for the family cannot be that means, nor the school, nor the priest. Not the family, for the average Catholic family is not equipped to give such a formation—parents lived their youth under different conditions; not the school, for the work of the school is ended; and not the priest, for he can only enter the workshop in the person of the workers themselves. Yes, it is only the workers themselves who can enter the modern factory and therefore it is only through the workers themselves that such an organization as we have in mind can be successful, an organization, that is, which will take the mass of young workers and transform it into a spiritual, a Christian entity.

Thus three things are necessary: to conquer the mass, to transform the mass, and to Christianize the milieu of the mass. First of all, the mass of young workers is to be transformed. I say the *mass*, that is the *whole body*, not just a select few. And so our movement must be *adapted to the needs of all*. The poorest must find in it their riches, the unhappy must find in it their happiness, and even the most abandoned must find in it their salvation.

Secondly, our movement must have for its object the transformation, the total and thorough Christianization of the lives of the young workers. This whole mass of workers of which we have spoken must be made to sanctify and transform their daily lives. God wills them to save their souls, and the means He, in His Providence, has given them are their daily working lives. Therefore, and let us make no mistake about this, the daily lives of the young workers must be sanctified: instead of being a hindrance they must

become a help in the securing of their eternal destiny. It follows, does it not, that the young worker must be made to reflect, that he must be given convictions, firm convictions, unshakable convictions, that he must be made to judge between what is right and what is wrong, between what is good and what is bad in all the doings of his life. He must be taught the beauty of his life of work, of his professional life. Oh, what a glorious thing is work! It is work that makes the sacred host, it is work that transforms the grape into eucharistic wine, it is work that fashions the Christian altar, it is only through work that bishops and priests are possible. Without work there would be no host, no wine, no altar, no priest, and no bishop. Yes, behind the Mass lies work, behind everything lies work, it is the most significant thing in life. Work is God's decree for men, work is the means by which mankind is served, work is that by which it subsists, work is that in which a man must find the fullness of his life. It is the sacrament of human solidarity, but it is more; it is the normal means of serving the great Creator. It is a collaboration with Him in the completion of creation, but it is also that by which we normally share in the pain of the Cross, and if in its pain, so also in its power. Yes, a glorious thing indeed, for by his work, the daily toil of his hands, a Christian can make the *Gloria* of his morning Mass continue to resound the whole day through to the accompaniment of the throbbing machine of the factory, or the rhythmic tapping of the mine. Work, I say, is a sharing in the Pain and in the Power of the Cross and the Calvary of our daily life is focussed in the Mass. And thus our daily pain, our daily work, should continue our daily Mass. There we have the perfection of Christian asceticism. The Christian ascetic is one who dies and lives with Christ in the Holy Eucharist and so the Christian worker must be shown how to find in his work a relationship with the Holy Mass. His work is that by which he dies with Christ, the pain by which he shares in the pain of Christ;

but he only dies that he might live. His work is that by which he lives, for it is the ordinary means of his sanctification during his daily life, that by which he can increase the store of supernatural merit within his soul. Work, then, is life-giving; but there is something else that is life-giving, too. 'He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood hath everlasting life.' Oh, what a profound mystery is work! In that we die by it, we continue the death of the Mass; in that we live by it, we continue the life of the Mass. Is it not true, then, that the whole working life of the Young Christian Worker should become one long Preface by which he gives thanks to God always and everywhere: *semper et ubique gratias agentes?*

Thirdly, the *milieu* in which the young worker find himself must be transformed. What a contradiction it would seem to some to place the Crucifix in the workshop, and yet where could it be more fittingly found than in this home of the pain and power of the Cross? It is the anomaly of our modern world, a sad paradox, if you like, but it certainly proves that there exists a grave necessity to transform, to Christianize, to spiritualize the atmosphere in which our young Christian workers find themselves, the atmosphere in which they are bound to work out their eternal salvation. Such a transformation cannot come about suddenly, all at once. No, there must be a leaven, an elite, which must pervade the masses with the spirit of Christ the Worker. But this leaven, this elite must not be something artificial, something moved from without. That is not, can never be, sufficient. Such a leaven must know the life of the workers to its depths, it must consist of those who live in the same surroundings, the same atmosphere, the same conditions as the workers themselves. Let me stress this: it is only the workers themselves that can enter the four walls of the factory or the shaft of the mine and it is *there*, in the factory and in the mine, that the milieu, the surroundings, the conditions of the workers are to be found. Your ordinary Catholic Actionist, your missionary, your

C.E.G. apologist, is forbidden to enter there, save in the quality of worker. Therefore, it is the workers, *as workers*, who must be the Apostles of the workers. In other words, the young workers' apostolate must be part and parcel of their daily life; and so that life becomes for them a conquest, an adventure into the realms of the supernatural by which the surroundings in which they toil will inevitably be influenced and ultimately transformed.

We have seen, therefore, that the tremendous work of the Y.C.W. is to conquer the mass of workers, to transform the mass and to spiritualize the milieu of the mass. But what shall we say of their methods? It is certain that they must be active. We cannot insist on this too much. Mere passive listening to doctrinal instruction will get them nowhere; the Y.C.W. is not only a school of religious instruction; it is more—a school of *personal formation*. Its members must be impregnated with thoughts, yes, Christian thoughts, doctrinal thoughts, yes, but above and before all, *active* thoughts. They must *learn to see* all the problems of life as they present themselves. Is it not true that one of the great mistakes of modern times is to act without seeing? Do we not often judge without first of all seeing? In the life of the apostolate it is most important to be able to *see* the problems with which one is faced, and the young Christian worker must be formed to do this. He must see and face reality, for it is in *reality* that his ideas must become incarnate. And having seen, the apostle must *judge*. How often are our solutions of difficulties with which we are confronted arbitrary, or *a priori*? We see the leakage. We judge that the leakage must be stopped. We start a club, a football team, a class of religious instruction. We fail, and we wonder why. Is it not because we acted arbitrarily? We missed the whole centre of the leakage, which is the factory, the workshop or the mine. It is *there* that our centre must be, it is there that Christ must be, and Christ can only be there in the persons of the workers themselves. The workers, then, must be taught to judge in an

a posteriori fashion, that is, they must judge *the reality*, not what they think is the reality. They have seen and they have judged. It remains for them to *act*. All the truths of their religion must be seen in the light of this *action*. There is little need for me to outline once more the Y.C.W. methods of action, by contacts, the formation of leaders, the sale of literature, reunions, study-weeks, conferences, and so on. Here is our vindication of the enquiry method, for by that method the young worker-apostle is taught to see reality, to judge in accordance with what he sees, and to act according as he judges. We are trying to form active members of the Church militant imbued through and through with the spirit of prayer, of mortification, and of sacrifice. We are on the way to re-ignite the fervour of the Christians of the first centuries, when all Christians were active Christians, apostles in the milieu in which they lived.

And what must we say of the work of the priest? The first requisite is that he give himself whole-heartedly to the militants he is forming. To refuse to do this is to jeopardise all he is doing. It is impossible to be a Y.C.W. chaplain by halves. In face of the many false mysticisms of the present day he must study and make his own the fundamental Christian principles, and especially the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ. Unless the Y.C.W. chaplains are prepared to do this, the whole movement will be but a house of cards.

Moreover, the priest must be the educator of the young apostles. He must give them a thorough doctrinal formation—but not in the atmosphere of the class-room or the lecture hall, not as if they were studying for an examination. No, he must try to see the doctrine he is teaching in the atmosphere of the workshop and the coal mine. This will be impossible for him unless he take the workers themselves into his confidence, unless he follows out the Y.C.W. method even in this. The young worker must be made to see doctrinal truths, to judge their value in his ordinary

working life, and to *act* in the light of them. The truths of faith are not to be separated from his daily life. How then will he teach, for example, the doctrine of Baptism? If he speaks of its institution by Christ, he will stress how Christ gave this sacrament in the fullness of His love with a special purpose for us. He will speak of the value of the character in a practical way, showing how it marks a young worker off as a member of Christ, how it makes him like Christ, how it signs him as the subject of Christ and incorporates him into Christ. He will strive to drive home the conviction that all these are practical realities; that it is a practical reality to belong to the Church of Christ, to be securely guided by the Church on the road to eternal happiness, to have the privilege of receiving the other sacraments, to have a new life, a supernatural life, to be more than a mere man, but to be a temple of the Holy Trinity, and a sharer in the nature of God Himself. In other words, the priest must make the young workers *see* what baptism means to them. Then they must make a judgment: what must *I* do to live in accordance with my dignity as a Christian; how can I do this in the ordinary surroundings of my daily life; should I not wish that all my fellow-workers enjoyed the same great privileges as I? Thus they are led naturally on to action. This is real formation, doctrinal formation. The same applies to the confessional, to the Holy Eucharist, to the Mass. Let us consider the Eucharist for a short time.

The Eucharistic life of the worker must not be separated from his prayer life or from his working life. The daily life of the worker should be a prolonged Eucharistic life, just as it should be a prolonged sacrificial life. What fruit the good priest will draw from the truth that the effects of the Eucharist are incorporation into Christ and union with one another by love! These truths are vital, living things for the life of the worker. Gradually he will be made to see that he is united with all his fellows through incorporation into Christ and such conviction

should engender love for his fellows—pure, devoted, generous, enduring love, the love of Christ Himself for all who suffer. He will understand in the light of the Holy Eucharist the meaning of those words: 'As long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to Me.' They express a reality founded on our union with one another in Christ, a union which is the fruit of the Holy Eucharist. Basing everything on the Sacrament of love, the zealous priest will gradually be able to convince the young apostles that he must not see in his fellow workers merely brothers, but he must see in them Christ Himself, and that to sin against them is to sin against the Master. Through the Eucharist, too, it is possible to show how every act of ours does not finish with us alone, but affects the whole Body. This sense of solidarity in Christ is one of the great characteristics of the movement on the Continent. The young workers realize that they belong to a Kingdom which must grow, their constant prayer is 'Thy Kingdom Come': thus each must contribute his share towards bringing about the incorporation into Christ of all his fellow-workers. Indeed, there is no end to the practical lessons which can be drawn, and are being drawn, for the workers from the doctrine of the Holy Eucharist. They must be made to love the Eucharist, for here they will perfect their love, give fresh impulse to their zeal, and find sustenance amid all the trials of life. They will be united with their Blessed Mother in heaven with the angels and the saints and with all their fellow workers on earth. What a stimulus they will derive to bring all into this union of the body of Christ!

By inculcating doctrinal truths in a vital, practical way, always in relation to the actual conditions of the workers' lives, the priest will be their counsellor, their support, their surety. He will gradually supernaturalize all their thoughts, he will fire them with zeal for a life of conquest, for a radiant life, a joyous life. He will never cease to encourage them to take an active part in the Sacred

Liturgy, for they must be filled with the Christian spirit, of which the Liturgy is the primary and indispensable source. In this way he will make the young workers really take hold of Christ to be gradually transformed into Him. He will make their lives one complete adoration of the Blessed Trinity dwelling within them. As he ascends the altar for his own mystic sacrifice, he will think of his workers and pray that the whole proletariat might receive the transformation which ought to be wrought by that sacrifice. He will try to love it himself, for it is the central point of that doctrine which must underlie the whole of his formation of the Y.C.W. leaders—the doctrine of the Mystical Body.

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