

LEON HARMEL AND THE RERUM NOVARUM

IT would be regrettable if the present year were allowed to pass without some mention in these pages of the centenary of Léon Harmel, born in 1829, that great lover of social justice whose name is connected with the issue of the *Rerum Novarum*. The great encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, which may well be called the workman's charter of liberties, is a doctrinal expression of the principles which Harmel strove during his long life of eighty-six years to put into practice among his own employees.

His fellow-countrymen held the celebrations of his centenary in Paris in February last, and in May similar celebrations took place in Rome. It is greatly to be desired that we also in England may find some fitting means during the course of this year to bring back to the public mind the principles and work for which the name of Léon Harmel stands. At present his name and work are almost unknown even among Catholics in this country, where, much more than in France, we are reaping the evil harvest of social injustice which he prophesied with such a certain voice. The French celebrations have produced a fruit of lasting worth in the brochure published by Père Guitton, S.J., with its title significative of the life-work of Harmel, *Léon Harmel et L'Initiative Ouvrière*. Liberty and enterprise of the individual—that is the type of teaching so much needed in these days of insane monopoly and centralisation which are fast bringing into existence the Servile State—the organised exploitation of the work of the masses for the private advantage of the few.

Monopoly, centralisation, and state control, these are the doctrines of Socialism, though they are being

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advocated and put into practice by those who bear Conservative and Liberal labels. Harmel was called a Catholic Socialist, but his Socialism was not of the type that a Catholic should repudiate. 'Centralisation,' he said, 'is essentially revolutionary in character; it stifles initiative and destroys liberty, while at the same time it is ruinous to authority . . . When the feeling of responsibility is lost then shipwreck is made of human dignity; there remains nothing but the state of servility or else revolt.' Thus he considered it his vocation in life to advocate and to inculcate the spirit of personal responsibility and individual initiative. Of everything tending to destroy freedom, such as monopolies, schemes of centralisation, and all state control of the private affairs of the working people, he was the bitter enemy. He would brook nothing that savoured of unjust compulsion or interference with the personal liberties of workmen, even though it were proposed as a necessary remedy against the existing social injustice. Thus, when that other great French leader of the Catholic social reformers of the last century, Count Albert de Mun, proposed a system of compulsory trade-guilds as a means of safeguarding the rights and liberties of workmen, Harmel would not consent for a moment. In giving his reasons for refusal he anticipated the recent pronouncements of the Holy See concerning the futility of Catholics imagining that they can participate with profit in such movements as C.O.P.E.C.

'We will not, upon any account, accept the compulsory guilds,' he wrote, 'because the combining of unequal and frequently opposed elements can only, from the moral point of view, produce disastrous effects. Those who would build in company must, first of all, speak the same language. Now Catholics and Free-thinkers have an entirely different language. . . . On all arguments concerning virtue, honesty, disinter-

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tedness, the origin and aim of life, they each speak a separate language. How, then, could they act in concert in reconstructing a moral fabric, which demands unity and community of efforts? Not that he did not believe in workmen's guilds. We shall see what he did in that direction. But first of all and above all, he had the true Frenchman's appreciation and love of liberty. For liberty is required individual initiative. Centralisation and standardisation are only other names for fetters and bonds. They stand for the effort to introduce the dead principle of the machine into the vital functions of a living organism.

'Moi, je suis l'homme d'une seule action : l'éducation de l'initiative privée,' he said. That, as we have said, he made his vocation in life—the education of the spirit of responsibility among the people, the formation and development among them of initiative and private enterprise. It is the very opposite of the principle of State Socialism which is being applied more and more in this country, where those whose incomes fall below a certain level are made to submit to the interference of state officials in almost every department of their lives—work, education, health, insurance and so on. Léon Harmel made it his business to form his work-people to the government of their own affairs. He knew that the free man is only he who is master of his own life and actions. *Liber est causa sui*, as Aristotle had put it.

Harmel was no mere theorist or crank who preaches what he is not ready to put into practice in his own case. Harmel had the courage of his convictions, and he reduced his principles to practice in his factory at Val-des-Bois near Rheims. As early as 1867 he had formed his workmen into a guild or corporation. No important measure which concerned them was settled without previous consultation with its members. A council of the corporation met every six weeks, the

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council being divided into six sections, each of which was appointed to look after a certain department of the affairs connected with the life and welfare of the members. Between them the sections of the council arranged the business of a mutual aid society, a society of insurance against accident, sickness and death, a savings bank, technical education, legal consultations, in a word of everything which concerned the well-being of the corporation. There was no workhouse at Val-des-Bois. The corporation had a hospice for childless widows and orphans, while a provident fund existed for all those who had served in the factory for more than twenty-five years. The salient fact is that all this was the product of private initiative and not state control, though its inspiration came from Harmel's meditations on the duties of a master of workmen before God and society. He condemned that attitude which looks on the workman as a machine more or less valuable according to the measure of the capacity of production. 'The first duty of a Christian employer,' he said, 'ought to be the reconstitution of the workmen's family.' For the family is the unit of the State, and to attack the family is to undermine the State.

At a time when the chief problem was considered to be the duty of the workman to his employer, Harmel, himself an employer on a large scale, threw down the challenge of his *Catechisme du Patron* in which he directed attention to the far graver duties and responsibilities of the employer. Like all men who insist on the truth he won for himself much unpopularity and unjust criticism. Of course he and his collaborators were accused of Socialism, despite the fact that the principles of his doctrine were the only remedy against the State Socialism which is being imposed on us today. His critics were ignorant and short-sighted, while Harmel faced the facts and from them read the future.

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‘Even if we do nothing,’ he said, ‘workmen’s unions will be formed without us; but they will be formed in opposition to the Church, for we know how the Radicals are devoting their attention to this matter. While we are divided by disputes which prevent us from bringing together all who are of good will, our enemies are working hard. Wait a few years and you will see the factory-workers regimented in an immense net-work of unions set up against God. The effort which seems to us difficult to-day will be impossible to-morrow; we shall have arrived too late.’

Realising the danger, he and his fellow-workers in the cause of social justice sought the help of the Holy See, which has always shown itself true to the spirit of the Workman of Nazareth in defending the cause of the oppressed. In 1889 Cardinal Langenieux, Archbishop of Rheims, led the first pilgrimage of French workmen to Rome, where in an address at the feet of Leo XIII he set forth the problems of the social question. Two years later the answer came in the form of the *Rerum Novarum* which set the seal of the Church on the life-work of Léon Harmel. In his encyclical letter the great Pope condemned the existing state of society as manifestly unjust in regard to the working people, who are deprived of their just share of the wealth which is produced chiefly by their labour. He indicated the causes of the injustice and the remedies which natural and divine law demand for the re-establishment of justice, commanding every priest to exert himself to the full in that great duty. It is a matter for serious self-examination, because the thirty-eight years that have elapsed have not removed but have increased the evil to a condition which in this country is well-nigh unbearable.

Therefore, as one means of commemorating the centenary of Léon Harmel, let us recapitulate shortly

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the main points of the encyclical which put the seal of the Church upon his teaching :

1. The present state of society is unjust.

'The condition of the working people is the pressing question of the hour. . . . Some remedy must be found, and found quickly, for the misery and wretchedness pressing so heavily and so unjustly on the vast majority of the working classes.'

2. The nature of this injustice.

'On the one side there is the party which holds power because it holds wealth; which has in its grasp the whole of labour and trade; which manipulates for its own benefit and its own purposes all the sources of supply, and which is even represented in the councils of State itself. On the other side is the needy and powerless multitude, broken down and suffering.'

If that was true in 1891, it is a thousand-fold more true to-day, when the tendency is for the rich to become richer while the poor become poorer. See the statistics just published by the commissioners of the Inland Revenue for 1928, along with the Poor Law report for the decade 1918—1928.

1906.—Only 19 persons having an annual income exceeding £50,000.

1928.—147 persons with an annual income exceeding £100,000.

„ 9,000 persons with an annual income exceeding £10,000.

„ Nearly 600 millionaires in the country.

„ Gross public income for the year £2,904,000,000. Of this the millionaires received nearly £60,000,000. In other words, in a country whose population is about forty

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million souls, 600 persons absorbed one fiftieth of the annual public income.

On the other hand, from 1918 to 1928 more than 600 million pounds were spent in the public relief of unemployment and destitution.

3. The causes of present social injustice.

'It has come to pass that working men have been surrendered, all isolated and helpless, to the hard-heartedness of employers and the greed of unchecked competition. The mischief has been increased by rapacious usury . . . which under a different guise, but with like injustice, is still practised by covetous and grasping men. To this must be added the custom of working by contract and the concentration of so many branches of trade in the hands of a few individuals; so that a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the labouring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself.'

We commend this passage to those who fail to see anything wrong in monopolies, combines, and mergers such as are being formed every day. To repeat the warning of Harmel: 'Centralisation is essentially revolutionary in character. It stifles initiative, destroys liberty, and ruins authority.'

4. The rights of the workmen.

'All means of human subsistence are derived either from labour on one's own land, or from some toil . . .

'It may truly be said that it is only by the labour of working men that States grow rich

'It is just and right that the results of labour should belong to those who have bestowed their labour

'Religion teaches the wealthy owner and the employer that their workmen are not to be accounted their

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slaves . . . that it is shameful and inhuman to treat men like chattels to make money by, or to look on them merely as so much muscle or physical power

‘The rich must religiously refrain from cutting down the workmen’s earnings, whether by force or fraud, or by usurious dealings A workman’s wages should be sufficient to enable him to maintain himself, his wife, and his children in reasonable comfort’

5. The obligations of wealth.

‘A man should not consider his external possessions as his own, but as common to all, so as to share them without hesitation when others are in need. Whoever has received from the Divine bounty a large share of temporal blessings, whether they be external and material or gifts of the mind, has received them for the purpose of using them for the perfecting of his own nature and, at the same time, that he may employ them as the steward of God’s Providence for the benefit of others. . . .’

Here we may take the opportunity of pointing out that the recent contributions made for the relief of the starving miners were not contributions of charity, but contributions of justice; or, as St. Ambrose puts it in its naked truth: *Non minus est criminis habenti tollere, quam cum possis et abundans sis, indigentibus denegare*. ‘It is no less a crime to take from him that has than to refuse of your abundance to succour the needy when you can’ (*Serm.* 64, *De Temp.*).

6. The great remedy—a better distribution of property.

‘The law, therefore, should favour ownership, and its policy should be to induce as many as possible to become owners. Many excellent results will follow from this, and, first of all, property will certainly be-

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come more equitably divided A further consequence will be the greater abundance of the fruits of the earth. Men always work harder and more readily when they work on that which belongs to them.'

Thus we return to the fact from which the Pope begins, namely, that the existing state of society is unjust, the remedy for the injustice being a more equitable distribution of wealth or property. It is to this very delicate question of the limitation of the right of private property that the grave attention of Catholic sociologists and moralists should be directed; for the truth is being forgotten that the right to private property is neither an absolute nor an unlimited right. As St. Thomas and the whole of Catholic Theology teach, it is conditioned and limited by a higher law, the law of the common good. We, therefore, gladly take this opportunity of putting before our readers some grave words of Mgr. McNicholas, O.P., Archbishop of Cincinnati, recently uttered at a Catholic National Assembly :

'Industrialism must ask itself whether it be just that fortunes should accumulate without limit. A system which allows an individual, during the course of a human life, to heap up a fortune of a hundred million dollars, for example, is a system which is bad in principle and which exposes society to a grave peril. Let not our silence on this vital question create any longer the impression of approbation on our part. . . .'

REGINALD GINNS, O.P.