Joseph Cardijn

The hour of the working class

Part IV - The YCW and the worker problem

What are the fundamental qualities which will make our Y.C.W. truly apostolic, a truly missionary YCW, which will help the Church to solve the great problem on which depends the future of the Church and the future of the world and of humanity ?

The working-class character of the Y.C.W. must be deepened, but this must not be a matter only of words. It is not the fact that the Y.C.W. exists among young workers. You can have a dramatic society, a table-tennis team, a youth club, a scout troop, among young workers, for young workers, and with young workers ; but it would most emphatically not be the Y.C.W.

The working-class character of the Y.C.W. is expressed in the fact that it deals with, and wishes to solve, the workers' problem. In any parish you have the problem of those leaving school to start work. What trade will they choose? Why? Where are they going to work? Who will be working with them? In any parish you have all the problems of their working life, of their work place, of their future as young workers, who, tomorrow, will be engaged, married, fathers of families.

How many young workers are there in the parish? Where do they work? What time do they start? What time do they finish? Where are they during the week? Far from the priests, far from the Church? What difficulties do they meet in the offices, the factories, and the workshops? What do they talk about? What influences them?

In the region, you have all the thousands of young workers who come to work in the area. You can see them any morning between six and nine. What are the dangers they are exposed to? What do they hear being talked about? What do they see? What influences them? These are the regional problems throughout the country.

On a national, and today, on an international plane, there is a workers' problem to be met and solved, not merely a problem of young workers but one of the whole working class. We must study this problem in such a way that it will no longer be true to say that it is only Socialists who understand the workers' problem; we must so study it, that Christian working men and women can say that we understand the workers' problem better than the Socialists and the Communists, because in our Movement we have both studied it and solved it.

Have our Y.C.W. sections got this working-class character, or are we satisfied with dances and amusements? Are our sections taken up with getting to know the young workers of the parish and the region?

Do they know all the factories, the workshops, the mines, the blast furnaces, the weaving and the spinning mills; all the different industries in which we find these thousand of young workers, in which we find the working class of the country and of the world? Do they see the importance of this problem on which depends the future of the Church and civilisation?

We must emphasise the working class character of our Movement by studying the problem of the workers.

We shall emphasise it also by developing the workers' pride and spirit and his sense of the nobility of work. This we must do, because of the divine vocation of each young worker, of each family, of the whole working class. We must make known this divine mission. Young workers must never be ashamed of their working-class parents.

We must develop in the working youth that ideal of the workers' apostolate by work and by the dignity of work. Then for the sake of that ideal, we must demand respect for work and for the worker, and respect for the working-class families. We must demand working conditions that will allow the worker to be an apostle, not a beast of burden, a slave, a machine, but a son of God and a collaborator with God.

Our Movement shows a working-class character by its working-class action. We must have influence in the places where people work; we must help the workers ; we must have workers' action. The Y.C.W. is not a group of young workers who meet and do nothing else. That is a caricature of the Y.C.W. Those young workers who meet together only to sing, to discuss, to spend a pleasant evening together, do harm to the Movement. There must be workers' action outside the meeting, in the district, in the home, at work.

The Y.C.W. is, and must be, much more important in the working life of the district than in its small meetings. It is in those places that the Y.C.W. must live and must show itself, not in the meetings where they are all together and where everything is pleasant. We must have meetings, because the rest is impossible without meetings and without helping each other. But the foundation stone, without which there is no Y.C.W., is the workers' action, with those leaving school, in the family, with the sick and the weak, and with those who will later have families.

In order that the Y.C.W. should have a working-class character, it must be, and it must build, a workers' movement. It is not a lot of little groups separated from each other but a workers' movement.

I have said that the working class needs a workers' movement. It will be Communist or Christian, one or the other. The day that Catholics and Christians understand the need for a workers' movement, they will see that this workers' movement must be built. It is not enough to pray for it and to go to Communion; it is also necessary to build. If you want a house, you can pray; but if you do not build it, there will be no house.

So the Y.C.W. wishes to build a workers' movement with the young workers, when they start their working life and first come up against their problems, so that they themselves will be the apprentices of that workers' movement, not studying it in books but bringing it about themselves. That is why there must be a link between the local sections and the regions, and between the region and the National Federation.

We must make them proud of a movement which is a force which represents the working class; which defends its interests with Ministers, public authorities and employers; which educates it and gives it a sense of the workers' responsibilities.

A workers' movement is at the same time a body and a soul, an organisation and a doctrine or spirit. We cannot be satisfied with spreading a workers' spirit or with having a workers' mentality. We must organise the young workers and affiliate them to the Movement, as well as serving them and being friendly to them. We have to go much further. We must make them understand the need for them to unite and become members of a workers' movement. They must prefer paying their subscriptions to spending a shilling at the pictures. The girls must prefer paying their subscriptions to putting on lipstick or powder. They have money for make-up, but they do not understand that it is better for them to pay

a shilling a month to save the working class. And we are afraid to tell them and make them understand.

But they do take part in the meetings, they do buy the magazine. Yet there are Y.C.W. leaders who are not members, who have not got affiliation cards, who do not pay subscriptions, who do not wear the badge.

The idea of an organised movement is completely lost, if we are satisfied with just having influence, just giving service, and just having friendship.

They say it is better for them just to attend meetings. How many do you have at the meetings? 50-60 How many of them are members? 10 pay subscriptions. They think they are YCWs. We deceive them by letting them think so; we deceive the Church, youth, the working class.

There is no way of solving the workers' problem without a powerful and representative workers' movement, which gives to the workers a sense of responsibility. This sense of responsibility is developed by making them understand the need of making a sacrifice each month ; they do it by going without beer, cigarettes, dancing or the pictures, in order to pay their subscriptions.

You cannot have the sense of the Movement, if you have not a sense of recruiting.

You have a Y.C.W. section. How many are in it? Twenty. How many a year ago? Twenty. Two years ago? Twenty.

A leader with the sense of the Movement should be more concerned with those who are not YCWs than with those who are, in order to influence them, to affiliate them. Otherwise the section is just a group of good chaps. The parish priest is proud of them. They are like wise little sheep. You never see them in the working-class districts, in the work places. That is not the way to conquer the working class. That is just a harmful mockery of the Y.C.W.

The second fundamental principle cannot be separated from the first; the apostolic and missionary character must be developed in our Movement.

It is not sufficient to talk about the apostolate, to pray for it, to mortify yourself for it. It must be practised.

I told you that the Holy Father, Pope Pius XI, has given us the special mission in the Church of being the missionaries of factory and workshop, missionaries in the working class. When we say that this apostolic missionary character must be developed in the Movement, it means that an apostolic hunger for the salvation of the working class must be developed in our leaders, in our National Movement.

A missionary must leave his country to go among the savages, to China or Japan; so it is today with the missions of the interior. We must leave the right thinking Christian surroundings to go amongst the Communists and the districts separated from t he Church. There must be missionaries there and apostles. But when we use these words, it is very easy to be satisfied with just words. Get a list of all the big factories in your parish or your region, and ask yourself how many YCWs are there and how many workers. That will show the degree of your apostolic character.

The apostolic missionary character must be emphasised. To open your eyes it is enough to get a list of office-workers. There are thousands of young men and girls working in the banks and the telephones. Where are they? Are they with us?

You see that there is still a mission to be fulfilled. You must emphasise in our Movement that preoccupation with all the workers, with all the workers' environment, with those thousands and thousands of young workers in offices, factories, spinning and weaving mills, and shops, the thousands and thousands who are not with us. Be determined to contact them and to become their friends. As long as we can say that we do not know them, they are strangers to us. You see how the problem arises if the Church becomes a stranger. There is nothing more terrible than to have to admit that we do not know the majority of the young workers.

The need for this apostolic missionary character should keep us awake at night, obsessed with the problem of the thousands of young workers, these future fathers and mothers of the working class, these future husbands and wives of working-class homes. When a young girl or woman leaves the Church, it is a disaster for the working class, a thousand times worse than when a man leaves the Church. When she is not in contact and does not understand her duty, there can be no more Christian education, no more Christian atmosphere, no more Christian love.

Our Movement, then, must have a working-class character and an apostolic and missionary character, both realist and realising. We cannot be content with dreaming of the mission we must build it.

Thirdly, to bring all this about, the Y.C.W. must form working-class leaders. The Y.C.W. is a school of worker leaders.

We can have thousands more priests and monks, yet we will lose all the working class if we cannot form working-class leaders. All the evidence shows it. We must form them in the factories, workshops, offices, trade unions, associations; leaders to represent the working class in the structural changes, in the committees, the economic councils, the social security organisations, the workers' holiday schemes. These organisations are all led by non-Christians: are we going to acquiesce in this scandal ? A negative attitude is a deathblow to the Church.

To be merely anti-Communist or anti-Socialist is doing nothing. So the Y.C.W. must be a school from the moment a young worker or working girl leaves the family and school to start work. It must ensure that they become working-class leaders. They must be formed for responsibility. You become a leader, in so far as you accept, understand, and fulfil responsibilities. Responsibility must be given. We must have regional teams with responsibilities. The character of a regional team is that each leader has responsibilities for a certain section or a service or an area.

It is not formed yet ? It will be if you give it responsibility. You must train it to accept responsibility. You cannot form it by just talking about methods.

The fourth thing are groups of working-class leaders. Perhaps that is the most necessary thing for today and tomorrow. Leaders who are isolated are useless. There must be leaders' groups surrounded by helpers, both men and women, in factories, on the transport services and during leisure. We must increase the leaders' teams in our section and region.

We must have teams whose members are pledged to each other, before the authorities, to stay for a stipulated time in the team.

Finally, we must have a plan of conquest. Leaders who have no plans, who do not know what to do, who do not know their region, are not leaders. Get a new section, a new team, which knows the region, which will have a plan of conquest and which will form the region.

In this way we can say that we have reached a new stage after the critical post-war years, years which have been difficult for our Movement. We have reached a decisive stage for the international Y.C.W. and the working class.

We must decide now to build a Y.C.W., which is apostolic and missionary, not only in our own country, but also in Europe, Asia, America, the world; a Y.C.W. on the scale of these missionary problems, this apostolic problem; a Y.C.W. which faces the workers' problems.

Yes, there must be martyrs; there must be confessors. The number of apostles must keep on multiplying. We shall never flinch.

- Joseph Cardijn