BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE BY CARDIJN 1955

WITH AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE BY MARGUERITE FIEVEZ

CONFIDENTIAL.

N.B. This document was drafted by Mgr Cardijn during the Eucharistic Congress in Rio de Janeiro in 1955. It was then reviewed and corrected by him. He added several clarifications and annexes. This is the second version.

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Man moves and God leads him...

Man proposes and God disposes...

Background:

1. Birth and adolescence

2. Seminary, university, teaching

3. Before the war

4. During the war

5. The immediate post-war period 1918-25

6. The National YCW: 1925-35, 1935-39, 1940-45

7. The International YCW

8. The war and the immediate post-war period 1945-50

9. Worldwide expansion

10. The preparation of the Rome pilgrimage

11. Future problems

Background

Beginnings

Difficulties

Progress around the world

Extension around the world

Future problems

It is odious to speak of oneself and to claim to have played an important role in the birth and expansion of a movement as providential as the JOC.

I would like those who read these pages to look at them simply as a testimony and to forget the witness, who can only confirm the judgment of the Holy Father: “Who could have thought when you laid the initial foundations of this edifice a quarter of a century ago in the midst of innumerable difficulties and contradictions that within a few years it would take on such vast proportions and soon extend not only to Belgium and a great number of European nations but to the far off Americans and nearly the whole world?”

(Autograph letter from Pius XII - 21 March 1949)

A N T E C E D E N T S

1. Birth and adolescence (1882-1896) :

According to the birth registry, I was born on 18 November 1882 in Chaussée de Haecht, Schaerbeek, where my parents were caretakers and my father a coach driver. Following my baptism in Saint Servais church on the 16 November, they sent me to stay with a nanny at Halle in my father’s region of origin as my mother was seriously ill (1).

Five or six years after my birth, my parents moved back to Halle where they initially established a small grocery that they were soon obliged to close for lack of customers in order to begin managing a small coal store which at first had only a small cart for supplying customers and

then later a horse-drawn cart to load coal from the station or the boat.

My father worked hard and from a very early age I helped him to unload the coal and serve customers and ss soon as I knew how to read and write to prepare invoices and orders since my father did not know how to read or write.

From the age of seven, I belonged to the choir. Every morning I brought home the milk and vegetables from my uncle and aunt who were market gardeners and I worked in the garden and in the fields to earn a bit of pocket money.

I knew all the tradespeople in the neighbourhood, including the stone cutters, masons, a woodworker, carpenters, tailors and shoemakers as well as a harness maker. And I spent hours observing and admiring their style and the products of their work.

At home, there was much talk about the factories in the neighbouring communes, particularly the artificial silk factory at Tubize, which attracted many young girls and women, who, intoxicated with ether, engaged in precocious prostitution in the adjoining field and at the station and in the train in the evening.

It was the beginning of the worker subscriptions era (2). In the morning and the evening groups of workers wearing clogs, both men and women, made the long trek from their villages to the station and back. We heard them talking and teasing one another as they passed by the door.

There was also much talk of the strikes and uprisings in nearby Wallonia. Worker leaders were already coming to speak at popular rallies. They were nearly all socialists. Fr Daens alone also came to hold political meetings and I would sneak in among the audience to listen to the speakers.

At school, I found my studies easy. I spoke and acted in all the plays. At home, I devoured books and newspapers (3) to the great disgust of my father who feared for my frail health and understood nothing of my passion for reading. I also dreamed aloud during the night and was a sleepwalker.

Following my Solemn Communion, the question arose of placing me as an apprentice and going to work. My father was exhausted and his small business was in decline. Then, one evening, no longer able to contain myself, I jumped out of bed, descended to the kitchen and told my astonished parents of my desire to become a priest for which my father and mother both sacrificed themselves.

I was then thirteen and it was at that age that I made my first discovery of the problem of working youth. When I returned on holidays from the minor seminary, my little comrades from school and First Communion, who were more intelligent and more pious than me, were obliged to go to the factories and to work. I found them corrupted, opposed to the Church, no longer

wanting anything to do with me.

It was a knife blow in my heart. I searched for the causes of this loss and corruption and promised to devote myself to saving them. I began my first enquiries in the factories and the neighbouring communes and I never ever abandoned them in Belgium and overseas for the rest of my life.

2. Seminary, University and Teaching: 1896-1903

At the minor seminary, while studying humanities, I was keen on literature and public speaking. The student movement provided many opportunities to speak in public as well as study days and congresses and also to go for country walks and to visit cities and art museums.

In philosophy, we had lively discussions during recreation and walks about the problems of social education and action and literature.

In the final term of my second year of philosophy, a telegram called me home to be present during the final hours and the death of my father. That was when I took the oath that decided the apostolic orientation of my priesthood.

The major seminary for theology (1903-1906) was then bubbling. It was the time of Loisy and modernism. The new methods of scriptural theology, history of the Church and even dogmatics as well as the journalistic activities, contacts with the leaders of the social movement and the Flemish movement, the Sillon, the ACJF and the Social Weeks in France, all that, all that orientation, that theological, apostolic and social renovation, resulted in study circles, provoked meetings, inspired reading and enthusiastic discussion. We went to hear Fr Rutten. We followed the Social Weeks and the Trade Union congresses. We wrote for magazines and newspapers. We did a genuine apprenticeship in speaking and action.

Following a personal intervention by Cardinal Mercier after my priestly ordination, in September 1906 I was sent to follow courses of Natural Law, Sociology and Social and Political Science at the University of Louvain.

There I came into close contact with Professor Brants, Monsignor Deploige and Professor Defourny (Prof. Vliebergh) (The reference to Prof. Vlieghbergh was added in the margin by Cardijn).

During the Easter vacations, I was sent to Germany to do an enquiry and study on home-based work (4), which enabled me to have contact with the heads and centres of the Christian worker movement in Cologne, Essen and elsewhere (Müller, Sonnenschein, Braun, etc.) as well as with the Women's Leagues, the Gesellenvereine and the whole range of social organisations.

During the long vacation, I was sent to the Study Weeks at Amiens, where I made contact with

Marc Sangnier. I travelled throughout the North, in Lille and Roubaix-Tourcoing, and I visited the future Monsignor Six (5), who was then the parish priest at Hellemmes, and the social employers. Then I had an unforgettable stay with the “Bon Père” (Good Father) Harmel at Val-des-Bois near Reims.

The North of France, like the rest of the country but in an even more spectacular fashion, had two competing social movements.

1) The Social Employers movement, which was animated by the Jesuits who had a retreat house (Mouvaux) for employers and workers. It was a paternalistic movement, a little copied from Val-des-Bois, where there was a factory worker committee for the religious life of the staff, who were mostly female. There was a chapel for staff and for the religious. They recited the rosary and sang hymns while at work (most of the workers were socialists and trade unionists despite their employers).

2) In the face of and against this, Fr Six and several colleagues tried to establish a genuinely worker movement with Christian trade unions, worker enterprise committees, worker formation. In the beginning, they were heavily combated and the Hierarchy did not support them. Later on, Bishop Liénart gave them his support.

It was only later through Professor Bayart and Fr Ranson that, from among the Social Employers, the very dynamic and more democratic movement of Young Employers, who were more in line with Specialised Catholic Action, was founded (see Professor Bayart’s lecture at the Social Week and later his book on Specialised Catholic Action). They gave great support to the early JOC (at the Social Weeks in Lille, Reims and Versailles). I gave a talk to the Young Employers at the retreat house in the North.

Upon my return from Val-des-Bois, as I was preparing to go study the works of Descurtins in Switzerland, I was appointed as sub-regent and teacher at the minor seminary in Basse Wavre!

That appointment which seemed to take me away from my social apostolate in fact provided the best preparation.

For nearly five years (in Brabant Wallon), I was able to carry out studies of pedagogy and practical methodology, make contact with the concrete problems of paving workers, masons, metalworkers, paper workers both men and women, at spinning and weaving factories.

I was able to learn to speak to workers in the direct language that they appreciated in spite of their rudeness and prejudices. And finally, during the vacations; I was able to make study tours to England on trade unionism and the cooperative movement and develop personal relationships with the leading trade union, cooperative and political leaders.

The article that I wrote for the Revue Sociale Catholique of the University of Louvain placed me

in contact with Ms Victoire Cappe. Having opened a school in Antwerp, she had asked Professor Defourny for a teacher on the English worker movement and he put her in contact with me.

At the end of the second trimester in 1912, I fell ill with pleurisy. A colleague came to see me and suggested that I apply for the position of curate at Laeken. I did so and, against all my expectations, I was appointed.

Joseph Cardijn

(1) See the registry and also the extracts of baptism and birth. According to the records of Saint Servais parish I was born on 13 November. The dean explained the difference between the birth recorded and the real date of birth… (Never completed by Cardijn.)

(2) See the monograph by the Institut Solvay.

(3) See the annexed note on my reading.

(4) See the Revue Sociale Catholique 1907.

(5) I was in correspondence with him from the time I entered the Major Seminary.