

Reflections On Work - January 1947

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The Catholic Worker, January 1947, 1, 2.

Summary: Quotes Peter Maurin's account of the work of Leon Harmel whose exemplary industrial organization inspired Pope Leo XIII. Praises the Quebec governments homesteading policies. Repeats the need for a philosophy of work and the ideal of the village community. Keywords: distributism, industrialism. (DDLW #431).

"Once upon a time," Peter Maurin said, "there was a man by the name of Leon Harmel. He lived at the same time in France as Count Albert de Mun. The latter tried to reach the intellectuals and the former the workers. Leon Harmel came of artisan stock and he swore to bring his policy as employer into harmony with the teachings of the Gospel. His father had been a good employer before him. Leo XIII said that Leon Harmel had given him the greatest consolation during his pontificate.

"Leon Harmel's life work began with the death of his wife in 1870 when he was forty-two years old. He had been very sad at his wife's death and had consoled himself with reading and prayer. 'All for Jesus,' by Faber, was one of the books that influenced him. He started then and worked for forty years more, for his workers, for his community. He never knew fatigue.

"He was the owner of spinning mills where 1,200 workers spun, dyed and wound the wool in Val des Bois, France. The work he did for his 1,200 workers back in 1870 resulted in social legislation that benefitted millions of workers in France now. What other employers refused to do voluntarily, the state forced them to do.

UNIONS

"He saw the need of industrial organization, and his workers were formed into syndicates, as the unions were called there. (Unions were at first so fought in this country that laws against them were passed. There was one famous law against "criminal syndicalism.") There was a council made up too of employers and employees and at this council everything was discussed from wages and hours to management of the business. There were sick funds, five to 15 cents a month being deducted from the pay. There were life pensions. The workers had their own bank and co-op store, a general bakery managed by the workers. Christian brothers ran a cooperative hostel for the unmarried men. There were few married women working, but girls who had to go home to get dinner for their families were let off half an hour early. Workers could take time off for confession, and all holy days were observed, not only of obligation, but those of the patron saints of the workers' groups and associations.

“The little village of Val-de-Bois was a garden city, a few miles out of Rheims. The mills were by a stream, and gardens and plots of land surrounded every cottage. There was a church with three priests and schools taught by the sisters and Christian brothers. The second and third generation of workers could be counted among these 1,200 who participated in the management of their work as well as benefitted by its materiality. The employer lived with his employees and the tone between employer and employee was one of friendship rather than class war.

“It was Leon Harmel who started popular pilgrimages to the Holy Father, not only to build up a sense of loyalty to the Holy Father, but to bring the worker to the attention of the Vatican. On one such pilgrimage when the Pope commended Leon Harmel, the latter said, ‘We will bring you ten thousand pilgrims.’

“In 1889 there were 17 trains of workers on pilgrimage to the Holy Father.

“Leon Harmel belonged to the third order of St. Francis. He was known for his imperturbable optimism. He died in 1915.”

OLD AND NEW

Peter Maurin told me these things during our first participation in class war which developed in strikes in the early years of the *Catholic Worker*. He was pointing out how in factories there were occasionally employers, though few and far between, who had a conscience in regard to their employees.

Peter was recognizing things as they were, recognizing that not all men wished to go to the land, that not all men wished responsibility. In a decentralized economy there could be such factories and such communities on the land. I thought of these conversations with Peter when so many visitors and correspondents took up the question of the machine and the land, as a result of my previous articles on work.

In Canada in early December, a pastoral letter signed by Cardinal Villeneuve, three archbishops and 14 bishops was read in all the Catholic Churches. The Bishops pointed out that Quebec still had 10,000,000 acres of tillable, uncultivated land, enough to establish 500 parishes with 200 families each.

“This is a permanent task,” the letter read, pointing out the need of space for the family, and work for the father. The government of Quebec, fearful of the urbanization of the population which means a degraded proletariat, offers great inducements to those who wish to get back to the land. Families must be approved and meet certain requirements as to health and ability. They are offered 100 acres at 30 cents an acre, free transportation, use of tractors, monthly allowances of \$15 for from three months to a year, cash grants for building houses and stables and credits for all land cleared. In the Gaspé peninsula 33 new parishes with from 150 to 200 families have been established in the last fifteen years.

NEW MEN NEEDED

A comment in a news story about this pastoral urging the Canadian Catholics landward reads, “no one realizes better than the Church itself that to the young men of today the virtue of pioneering sounded bleak and harsh beside the siren voice of the cities.”

And we repeat, as long as in our education we have no philosophy of work, no recognition of man and his capabilities, his wholeness, his holiness, his dignity as a worker; as long as we accept our city civilization and its amusements, radio, movies, drink and cigarettes with the comment “there is no sin in it,” we will continue on our merry path through chaos to catastrophe.

As long as we think of the isolated farm, rather than the village community, as long as we are business-minded in regard to farming, thinking of cash and profits rather than farming as a way of life, as long as we neglect to teach voluntary poverty as an ideal, we are going to have fierce competition on the land as well as in the city. Four H. clubs, the teaching of spinning and weaving in the Canadian schools, the cooperative set up of Nova Scotia and the maritime provinces, and Christian recreation can bring people together and bring a taste of heavenly joy here on the earth.