

The Church and Work

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, September 1946, 1,3,7,8.

Summary: Discusses in length the modern industrial problem of the machine and its relation to factory, land and worker. Explains the C.W.'s attempt to gain the workers back to Christ, by explicating a philosophy of work that distinguishes between those machines that are the extended hand of man and those that make man the extended hand of the machine. Such a philosophy sees people as cooperating with their creator, and to labor is to pray. Criticizes American Catholics for not applying Papal teaching to the work area and shows a particular acrimony to a priest who tell workers to sanctify their surroundings instead of changing it. (DDLW #154).

I have before me Canon Cardijn's pamphlet, "The Spirit of the Young Christian Workers," and on Page 21 of that pamphlet he says: "It is useless to steer clear of the vital and therefore most difficult problems under the pretext of Catholic Unity." So I shall try to write about most difficult and vital things such as the factory and the land, and the workers.

Catholic Action

The Catholic Worker is not part of Catholic Action as such, having no Mandate from the Hierarchy for this work. It is lay activity, so well described by Maritain in his book, *TRUE HUMANISM*. The ACTU (ASSOCIATION OF CATHOLIC TRADE UNIONISTS), the YOUNG CHRISTIAN WORKERS, THE CATHOLIC ACTION CELLS that are springing up all through Manhattan and Brooklyn, are definitely part of CATHOLIC ACTION. There are Chaplains in charge, and whether the work is in the guise of CYO (CATHOLIC YOUTH ORGANIZATION) or YCW, it is the attempt to reach the workers, to try to gain back the workers to Christ. Canon Cardijn quotes the Holy Father, Pope Pius XI as having said to him, "The workers of the world are lost to the church." And he has had what is in effect a MANDATE from the Holy Father himself to try to reach the workers of the world.

Lost Philosophy

Beginning at the beginning of the pamphlet, there is that much quoted line, “Without work there will be no host, no wine, no chalice, no altar and no Church,” and I wish to fling down the challenge at once, that what is the great disaster is that priests and laity alike have lost the concept of work, they have lost a philosophy of labor, as Peter Maurin has always said. They have lost the concept of work, and those who do not know what work in the factory is, have romanticized both it and the workers, and in emphasizing the dignity of the worker, have perhaps unconsciously emphasized the dignity of work which is slavery, and which degrades and dehumanizes man.

Sanctifying Their Surroundings

Can one sanctify a saloon, a house of ill fame? When one is in the occasion of sin, is it not necessary to remove oneself from it? If the city is the occasion of sin, as Father Vincent McNabb points out, should not families, men and women, begin to aim at an exodus, a new migration, a going out from Egypt with its flesh pots?

Subtle Sin

And when we are talking about sin, I’m not talking about adultery, fornication, theft, drunkenness as such. In the great clean shining factories, with good lights and air and the most sanitary conditions, an eight-hour day, five-day week, with the worker chained to the belt, to the machine, there is no opportunity for sinning as the outsider thinks of sin. No, it is far more subtle than that, it is submitting oneself to a process which degrades, dehumanizes. To be an efficient factory worker, one must become a *hand*, and the more efficient one is, the less one thinks. Take typewriting, for instance, as an example we all know – or driving a car, or a sewing machine. These machines may be considered good tools, an extension of the hand of man. We are not chained to them as to a belt, but even so, we all know that as soon as one starts to think of what one is doing, we slip and make mistakes. One IS NOT SUPPOSED TO THINK. TO THINK is dangerous at a machine. One is liable to lose a finger or a hand, and then go on the scrap heap and spend the rest of one’s life fighting for compensation for one’s own carelessness, as the factory owners say, for not using the safety devices invented and so plentiful, for the benefit of the workers. The existence of those same safety devices is an example of the truth of what I write.

The Danger

AND HERE IS THE DANCEROUS PART, it is not so much the loss of the hand or the arm, but the loss of one’s soul. When one gives one’s self up to

one's work, when one ceases to think and becomes a machine himself, the devil enters in. We cannot lose ourselves in our work without grave danger. De Rougement brought this out in his last book, *THE DEVIL'S SHARE*. As soon as one becomes *beside* one's self, as soon as we lose ourselves, as soon as we give ourselves up to anything, whether it is sex, or drink, or work at the machine, there is the danger of the devil entering in. He looks for just such opportunities, and modern life is full of them. See our recreations football, baseball. These are supposed to be recreations and yet they enjoy themselves most who most thoroughly lose themselves in the mob. And the mob is a mob whether friendly or hostile, as Eugene Debs, the great socialist labor leader pointed out.

"I have only experienced the friendly mob," he said once, when I was released from jail, and they met me and bore me on their shoulders. It was a friendly mob but it smelt like a beast. The beast was there."

"Work is not a punishment, a curse, or enslavement, but the cooperation of the laborer with his Creator and Redeemer," Canon Cardijn writes.

But what kind of work? "Without the worker there will be no host, no wine, etc."

Nothing Amidst Much

In the last few issues of the *Farm Labor News*, published by the Farm Labor Union which has its headquarters in Memphis, Tennessee, it is stated:—there are 6,744,000 family workers, migratory workers on the land. These are homeless, landless people, wandering around harvesting crops. In that same issue they speak of a 50,000 acre plantation where 10,000 human beings work. They deal with the machine, the cotton picker, and the flame-thrower weed killer which is about to displace "one half the present population engaged in cotton farming" according to the Department of Agriculture.

"The House of Haves has just about gotten farming fixed" R. E. Paris of Florence Arkansas, writes to the editor. "I cannot find any place where the tenant farmer and sharecropper fit in this machine age. I am going to liken the machine age in farming to the man who built his house upon the sand. The storm came and the wind blew and the house fell and great was the fall thereof."

"The Department of Agriculture expresses the pious hope that the displaced workers will find jobs in industry," according to the story. The very use of the word *pious* shows the undercurrent of bitterness to religion, though the union works with ministers all through the south.

Widespread

I have these papers before me and so I quote from them but the same goes for wheat growers who have 100,000 acre farms and gamble in their one crop farming

and live in the cities. They grow the wheat and homeless laborers harvest it. It is milled in big cities and all the good taken out of it in the way of wheat germ, and the dead product sold to the consumer. Is this the kind of wheat our Lord took into His hands when He consecrated it and said, “TAKE, EAT.”

Sanctify

CAN we sanctify such work?

“Too much cotton and none to wear,” reads another story. There are twenty-two million bales in the warehouses of the world and the price is over twenty-six cents a pound, the highest it has been in twenty-two years. The only way workers will get cotton in clothes, work clothes, comforters, curtains, sheets, towels (one can’t use silk or rayon or nylon for these) is to wait for the U. S. Government to work out a world agreement with other countries to limit the acreage and set the prices. Meanwhile the cotton is held in the storehouse. Can one sanctify such practices as these? Oh, the efficiency of modern business which leads to war!

I Accuse

Yes, I accuse the leaders, the teachers, the intellectuals, the clergy, of having a romantic attitude towards the workers. They write with fervor and glowing words—they dramatize the struggle, they are walking on picket lines, they love the man in the dungarees and the blue or plaid shirt they write glowingly of his callused hands—they take these leaves from the communist notebook—they are glorifying the proletariat, the dispossessed, the propertyless, the homeless, and the workers can hang a holy medal on their machine or over their bunk in the fo’castle and pray as they begin and finish their work, and go home to their two-room or three-room apartment and surrounded by children and an exhausted wife, sanctify their surroundings— or forget them in the nearest tavern with polluted beer, adulterated wine, or hard liquor. The YCW comment at the end of Canon Cardijn’s pamphlet is this: “The YCW shows the workers that whatever a man’s state (which after all is according to the dispensation of providence) his primary struggle is against himself, and when that is well in hand the rest is largely a question of *adapting himself to his surroundings*, in order to get the very best out of them both spiritually and temporally.”

Accept? Then?

In other words, accept the machine, accept the factory, the speed-up system, the work in which you are spent—so spent indeed, that on coming out of the factory exhausted, though not physically (the work is light, many say), one seeks the anodyne of drink or sex. No, the immorality is not in the factory, so much, it is after it, a result of it. For some months I lived in Farmingdale, Long

Island, where there was a gigantic airplane factory where they were constructing bombers. It was flung up during the war, and transportation was difficult what with gasoline and tires, and poor bus service. So girls were always accepting lifts from the men to and from work. Even on the bus there was crude horseplay and immodest talk.

Effects

A man is “spent” in his work. He is emptied. He is emasculated. And vital statistics from Dr. Baker’s figures from the Department of Agriculture, show that it is not only city life, but life in the factories that is cutting down the size of the family so that at present we are a middle-aged country.

I speak frankly as a lay person to priests, of this vain attempt of priests to urge the workers to sanctify one’s surroundings, to adapt oneself to one’s surroundings. What kind of homes do priests live in? How large are their rectories their monasteries, their house of studies? How can they speak of “home” so glowingly, how can they talk of the large family with such unction, when they see the two-room apartments, the four-room apartments on Mulberry street, on Mott street?

Trash

Should the worker sanctify his surroundings in the lumber camps where huge forests are being denuded all over the country, for profit. Do they bring him homes: Where did all the lumber go? It is tragic, as I write on this white paper to think that trees were cut down to make this paper, and the billions of Daily News, True Stories, detective fiction, movie magazines that fill the drug stores and the bus stations. “Pennsylvania used to have 28,650,000 acres of forest. Now less than 4,000 acres of forest remain within the commonwealth and Pennsylvania has dropped in lumber production from the first to twenty-fourth place among the states.” (Circular from the Department of Forests of Pa.)

Do we just “adapt ourselves” to this evil of destruction and waste, not only of men but of raw materials? We can no more bless it “sanctify it” than the priest can bless the scrap iron which he sprinkles with holy water in the church yard before it sets off to kill Japanese or Germans. (A picture of this was in the Hearst paper in Chicago.)

And yet, that is what the clergy are doing, when they accept this system, this *industrial* capitalism. Canon Cardijn is opposed to the materialism of the day, but most priests when they sensitively use the word materialism, rather than communism or red fascism, are meaning the same thing.

Temporary Lift

“Where Christ is present among the masses, in all their circumstances, conditions, modes of life, there *Christian mysticism*, which is union with Christ, takes on a deeper and more extensive reality.” I am still quoting from the pamphlet. But I deny that Christ is present in the factories, among the workers, that they take Him there “The workers of the world are lost to the church.” They are still lost for all the Jocist YCW, CYO, and Catholic Action that is going on. It is impossible to sanctify a house of shame. It is a delusion, a deception, and once more the workers are being betrayed. For a while they may be aroused to hope, they may lose themselves in meetings, in mass demonstrations, in pilgrimages to the Holy Father and filled with the afterglow of these glorious experiences warm their factories with them, but it will not be lasting. Communism creeps inexorably on, and shows its influence one way or another. The Popular Republican Movement of France, which has as part of its economic program nationalization or national control has elicited this comment from the Holy Father, in his letter to the Social Study Week held by French Catholics in Strasbourg recently:

“IT IS EVIDENT THAT INSTEAD OF ATTENUATING THE MECHANICAL NATURE OF LIFE AND LABOR IN COMMON, NATIONALIZATION, EVEN WHEN LICIT, THREATENS TO ACCENTUATE THESE STILL MORE, AND CONSEQUENTLY THE BENEFIT DERIVING FROM IT TO A TRUE COMMUNITY IS VERY MUCH OPEN TO QUESTION”

The Pope’s Words

In 1939, in an address to the International Congress of Catholic Women’s League, the Holy Father said: “In this age of mechanization the human person becomes merely a more perfect tool in industrial production and how sad it is to say it, a perfected tool for mechanized warfare. And at the same time material and ready-made amusement is only thing which stirs and sets the limits to the aspirations of the masses . . . In this disintegration of human personality efforts are being made to restore unity. *But the plans proposed are vitiated from the start because they set out from the self-same principle as the evil they intend to cure. The wounds and bruises of individualistic and matererialistic mankind cannot be healed in a system which is materialistic in its own principles and mechanistic in the application of its principles . . .* To heal the wound there is one sovereign remedy, that is a return of the heart and mind of mankind to knowledge and love of God the common Father, and of Him whom God has sent to save the world, Jesus Christ.”

The Masses

Continuing this charge of sentimentalizing or romanticizing of the proletariat, we would like to call attention to the use of the word Masses. I used to work for

the *Old Masses*, and I had quite a few articles in *The New Masses* published by the Communists in New York City. One of my articles on the birth of my daughter in a public hospital was reprinted all over Russia and, according to my old friend Michael Gold of the Daily Worker staff, I have quite a bit of royalties coming to me in Russia since it was translated and reprinted in many languages. Diego Rivera, the Mexican artist, told me in 1929 that he had read it when he was in Russia. It was he, in fact, that told me it had been reprinted. *The Masses*. What a glowing word it was to us then. To speak to the Masses. To write to the Masses, to be a part of the Masses—our hearts during those years, glowed within us at the idea.

The People

And now the Holy Father in one of his great Christmas messages, points out the difference between *the Masses* and *the people*. He tells us that the expression, *the Masses*, conveys the idea of the inert mass, being moved this way and that, swayed as by a wind, controlled by the demagogue. Whereas “the people” conveys the idea of persons, creatures of body and soul, temples of the Holy Ghost, men and women and children made to the likeness of God, divinized by their baptism and made sons of God.

Since that great message the Holy Father (these comments of his were only a part of it) I have hesitated ever again to use the word “*Masses*.” Canon Cardijn or his translator uses it thirteen times in a twenty-page pamphlet. He used *crowd* once—“to capture the crowd,” and *multitude*, once.

Long Range View

This is an old controversy. We started to read about it in the pages of Blackfriars, the English Dominican monthly. It certainly went on when G. K. Chesterton and Eric Gill were still alive. (It is their point of view we represent.) We gave up pages of the Catholic Worker to it when Father Paul Sanley Furfey and Father John J. Hugo wrote on it back in 1939. It often ends in acrimony, and I hope that our friends will not credit us with any but the most loving desire to gain them for a long-range program of action. We need to start in the factories of course. Here is what Eric Gill said in some letters to the Catholic Worker in 1940:

“I should like to say simply that fundamentally the problem of the machine is one which should be dealt with by those who actually use machines. At present, as you know, the responsibility for using or not using machines is entirely that of men of business whose interests are, of course, simply in buying and selling and not in making, and therefore in a broad way it may be said that the first thing to be done (first in the sense of most important) is for the workers to recapture the control of industry.”

Mad Commercialism

“This, of course, is the communist idea but, unfortunately, the communists couple with this their very crude materialist philosophy and their equally crude idolatry of the machine. For the rest, it should be obvious that some things are better made by machines than by hand. For instance, it would be ridiculous to make typewriters except by mass production, otherwise they would be absolutely prohibitive in price, and the whole point of a typewriter is to save money and time. But again it should be obvious that the whole idea of saving time and money, to such an extent as we have developed it, is a product of our quite mad unholy commercial competitive rush.”

Hand, Man, Holiness

“Then again, such things as watermills and windmills, which save human labor grinding corn, sawing wood, etc.) are obviously proper instruments and this brings us to the point of distinguishing between those machines which simply save human muscular labor and those which displace human creative skill. . . the worker is a man and not simply a ‘hand.’ Work done by man is human work to be valued and thought of as such and not merely as a ‘cost in the account books.’

“To labor is to pray – that is the central point of the Christian doctrine of work. Hence, it is that while both Communism and Christianity are moved by ‘compassion for the multitude,’ the object of communism is to make the poor richer but the object of Christianity is to make the rich poor and the poor holy.”

Riches or Responsibility

“The Trades Union movement seems to be moved solely by the ambition to raise wages and shorten hours of labor. However just such an ambition may be, it can never be the ruling motive of the Catholic Worker. The poverty induced by Industrialism stinks, but poverty as seen by Christians is actually a holy condition. Therefore, what is demanded by the Catholic Worker is not so much money as control, not riches but *responsibility*.”

“And this is in line with the Christian Doctrine of private property, the individual appropriation of the means of production. For it is as workmen that man primarily needs property. How else can he maintain complete responsibility? ‘The hireling flieth, because he is a hireling,’ but this is not to say that the wage slave is a bad man but that he has not the responsibility of an owner, and only he who is fully responsible can truly serve his fellows.”

The Lord Knew

I would like to go on with comments on passages from the pamphlet, “The Young Christian Worker.” The lay apostle, Canon Cardijn says, “must aim at getting hold of the Crowd.” I say, with Dom Chautard, that he must aim at the handful, the few, as Canon Cardijn himself did when he started his parish work with six young people to train as lay apostles. Beware of the Mass! Of the Crowd! Remember Debs’ words about the beast there is in it. Our Lord knew what was in men and when the crowd cheered Him as He came into Jerusalem He knew that the following week they would crucify Him.

Whole and Holy

“The worker’s life is a prayer and a sacrifice.” Can a *hand*, or *tool* pray or sacrifice? Can a man who is not *whole*, be holy? “We may speak of the mysticism of labor without exaggeration.” But when a man loses himself is it God or the devil who is going to enter in? De Rougement’s book is important reading. It was reviewed by *The Catholic World*, and though written by a non-Catholic, it contains only Catholic truths, according to the reviewer. De Rougement is the Protestant leader, a Swiss, of the personalist and communitarian movement in Paris, of which Emmanuel Mounier is the Catholic leader.

Supernaturalize

“This supernaturalized ideal of labor must needs be accompanied by a supernaturalized ETHIC of labor, by a proper morality in working conditions. Such influences as self interest, hatred and violence have no place in it. Catholic teaching on this point is in direct opposition to that of the atheist, the agnostic, and the materialist, and it is these who have the ear of the laboring classes in the matter of work.” Here again is the pacifist in the class struggle. Yes, we are all pacifists in the class struggle, though not in international wars, alas! Although if ever war was justified, one would think that people could fight for their homes for their lands for their families their work. (Half of the tenant farmers and sharecroppers of the South are going to be evicted in the interests of big business, remember, within the next five years, according to the Department of Agriculture of the U. S.)

Holy Resistance

Supernatural selfishness *is* in order here, and a hatred of such work that degrades and dehumanizes. We must hate evil. I am not arguing for class war, for resistance at the point of machine guns, for barricades (which go, by the way, with the city streets), There must be some probability of success; that is one of

the conditions for a just war. But I am in favor of the nonviolent techniques of the strike, the withdrawal of labor, violence will be inflicted, but let it not be on the part of the worker. In Steinbeck's book, *IN DUBIOUS BATTLE*, about a strike of the migratory workers in California, the closing pages tell of the killing of the organizer of the workers, and the satisfaction of the communists at this shedding of blood. One must lay down one's life for one's brothers, they say, we must sacrifice even to the shedding of blood. Of course they do not stop there. But they do regard the shedding of one's blood as so essential that I have seen the workers goading the police to bring about this violence so satisfying to man, who has not been taught the use of his spiritual weapons so that he may take heaven by violence, and make it more possible to praise and worship God here and now thus beginning one's heaven on earth to what extent it is possible.

Saints and Workers

"The basic ideal of family life is to"multiply the number of the elect". Let this be brought home to the working classes, for they in particular are equal to the acts of generosity, devotion and self denial which such an ideal demands."

What about wages, housing, the mother working, the father withdrawn for long hours from the home, so that under our present civilization a child might as well not have a father. And are not the clergy "laying burdens too heavy for them to bear," on the shoulders of the workers, and themselves not willing to lighten them by lifting a finger, to change the conditions of their life. It is not right that *heroic* sanctity be demanded of the worker and the women of his family. We are all called to be saints, St. Paul says, and Pope Pius XI has repeated in his encyclical on St. Francis de Sales. It should be an ordinary thing, not a heroic thing. What is being done to make it possible for the worker to be a saint, a good ordinary saint, following the Little Way.

Sound Doctrine

"Maybe the worker's life is a Way of the Cross, but . . . it is a continuation of the mission of Christ the Worker. Let these His successors grasp the possibilities and the dignity of their state, and they will be proud of it, *instead of trying to change it.*" Woe, woe to the shepherds who do not feed the sheep good sound teaching. Woe to the shepherds who feed themselves and do not feed the sheep. In Ezekial there are terrible warnings and a terrible threat. If the workers are lost to the church, who will be held responsible?

Priest and Worker

Cardinal O'Connell of Boston worked in a cotton mill when he was a little boy, but he only stayed a week or so. He soon got out of it, I've heard many a worker

say laughing. Canon Cardijn worked too (was it in a factory?) when he was a child and his father had worked before him, but he did not stay there. Our Lord was a worker yes, as well as a priest, and St. Paul worked with his hands as a weaver of goats' hair. But they did not work in factories, tending a machine, sitting half senseless in front of it, their hands unused, as I have seen men do in the Pepperill mills in Maine. They saw their work, they were responsible for their work, so they could regard their work as holy. It was whole work. I am tired of hearing our Lord compared to a modern factory worker. Philip Hagren has a biting and strong article in a recent issue of the CATHOLIC WORKER (it had been printed in *The Cross and the Plough*) and in it he wondered how priests would like it if there was subdivision of labor in offering up the Holy Mass, thousands of them reciting the Gloria, thousands reciting the Introibo (but to be consistent we should break it down to one senseless syllable, rather than to a prayer or canticle). The priests' work has remained unchanged, but not the factory workers'.

What To Do

It is all very well to criticize, people will say. We will agree to much of what you say, but what is there to do? But I say, we have been told what to do, but will we do it? Do we listen to the Holy Father himself? Did we listen during the war when he urged us not to extend the scene of carnage and we immediately, here in America entered in. When he urged the sisters and priests to keep the war out of the school room and they went on selling war stamps; when he urged setting up cities of refuge, while we justified the bombing of cities and innocent peoples.

Writers

G. K. Chesterton has written two books—WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE WORLD and THE OUTLINE OF SANITY. Eric Gill has MONEY AND MORALS and CLOTHES. If our priest friends would study these four books, and then start thinking in terms of the few, rather than of the Masses, we would have a beginning.

If they would only read Father Vincent McNabb, a priest like themselves, and prayerfully consider what he has to tell them, he who lived in the largest city of the world.

Kinds of Work

All workers do not have to be farmers. There are many occupations on the land. A community needs libraries, bookbinders, engravers, letterers, craftsmen of all kinds. A community needs bread, and bakeries, and carpenters and cabinet makers, and silversmiths, and laundries, and blacksmith shops. Teachers are

needed and doctors are needed, and nurses. There are many small towns and villages that need apostles. Where are the men who will, like Moses, so have compassion on the slavery of their brothers that they will lead them out of the land of bondage, literally. First by word and then by deed. There are not only the Pharaohs to be considered but the Bishops.

Help Or Hinder

I attended a meeting in New York when Canon Cardijn spoke. I wondered, were there any workers there? Or were they not all of them white collar workers, office workers, desk workers, paper workers. Did they not associate themselves with their employers, rather than with the workers, and did they not in subtle ways do the work, too, of their employers, in sanctifying their surroundings and making the worker realize the dignity of his surroundings and his work rather than to attempt to change them?