**Edited version**

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The heart of Catholic social thinking is the “old and the new”. But in a sense we miss the point if we think that everything Cardinal Manning did and the Dockers’ strike was the starting point. What we can say is that it is the starting point of modern Catholic social thinking.

For the last 34 years I have been trying to link the reality of the Church’s social thinking and the world of work in the Centre for Church and Industry in Manchester. As a student I went to Plater College, originally called the Catholic Workers’ College, which was probably one of the best things I ever did, because it gave me an opportunity to study Catholic social teaching, and it managed to enthuse my love of the subject. My own roots lay in the YCW movement (Young Christian Workers) to whom I was introduced as a young man. In fact when Joseph Cardijn (right) founded the YCW in the 1930s it was known in Belgium as the ‘Youth Union’ and later became known as the ‘Young Christian Workers’. Cardijn would thump the rostrum at mass rallies and say, ‘You are not slaves, you are not beasts of burden, you are sons and daughters of God!’, and the crowd would cheer.

It was my involvement with the YCW that led me to seriously consider Plater College as an option for study and it was the YCW that led me into trade unionism in my teenage years inside the brewing industry, not because I knew everything about trade unionism, but what it did do was inspire me in the heart of what the gospel stands for. What is the greatest commandment? Love God, and love your brother and sister as yourself. That’s the root of Catholic social thinking.

I’ve spent 40 years inside the trade union movement and I have the great privilege of being the National President of the Commercial Services section of the GMB (I was formally in APEX - Association of Professional, Executive, Clerical and Computer Staff) before it joined the GMB. In fact one of the first events I went to when APEX merged was in Beckton to celebrate 100 years of Will Thorne’s establishment of the gas workers’ union. It was a celebration of the foundations of the GMB and the great gas workers dispute (in 1889) which actually won an 8 hour day. In his priestly formation Cardinal Manning was in a rural parish and knewwhat it was like for the landless to be without land; he knew what it was like to be powerless, because he experienced it in his ordinary everyday ministry in the parishes that he served. In Ireland in the 1840s he saw the graphic impact of people losing land, and the consequences of the famine, when many fled to England and overseas. He would later become a key campaigner on the ‘Irish question’, so this experience obviously made a deep impression on him.

So here we are at a pivotal time for the whole trade union movement, a pivotal time in our social and economic history. One of the stories told about Will Thorne is that when going to visit one of the workers in the backstreets around here, he saw the worker’s wife sitting half-naked on a bench with breast cancer. He saw her sores and her agony, and it moved him deeply to see the abject poverty that these people were living in, 12 or 13 people living in a house or a room in order just to survive. This was the heart of a situation in which men went daily to the docks to work and were put in pens to try and get a ‘tally’ (a ‘brass tally’ would be exchanged by the Dockers for work) or some means to be called for 4 or even 1 hour’s work. The pens were there to keep them in place and to protect the foreman who had to allocate the daily work. This was the economic order at its most brutish, at its most brutal: people *fighting* to get work.

We have to steep ourselves in the reality and agony of that: day in, day out, going back to try and get enough to try and live a simple pittance of a life, with children, with wives and with families to support. That’s the truth of it. This was the reality that Cardinal Manning’s parish and neighbouring parishes saw. This is what made it powerful. How could we say that we love our neighbour and that in them we see the image of God, and at the same time we see them impoverished, denied the very existence of even a penny to live on? To grovel for work day in, day out? How could we see people treated that way and believe in a loving God? That’s what powered Manning’s heart and it’s the power of the gospel that roots us in Catholic social teaching.

In the introduction we started with the match workers dispute. It was of course women who were involved in that, and we often forget the struggle of women at that time. Women played a major part, but it’s only much later that we actually see women’s unions being formed.

Manning had seen and lived the struggle; he had opened his doors, his heart and his mind to it, informed by a love of the gospel. As in the case of Joseph Cardijn, he saw young workers going into the workshops, factories and mills near his home. After coming back from the seminary Cardijn couldn’t understand why the young workers were so powerless, so downtrodden. What happened to the energy, the joy, the love, the freedom, the excitement? Why now had work turned them into brutish beings? This is what also motivated Cardijn to say this is not right. This is wrong. How can I have this privileged life? And of course he himself had come from a working family and seen this struggle closely, which is why he committed his vocation to the role of the workers. Manning’s life was also committed in this way.

We also forget that in 1872 Manning stood on the platform with the agricultural workers when they were establishing the Agricultural Labourers Union. That’s 17 years prior to the dock strike. So it wasn’t just that (the dock strike). This is a continuum. It is illustrative of somebody reflecting gently on the core message of the gospel, the fundamental message in Catholic social thinking: the unique value of every single human being in the eyes of God.

So I’m not surprised that he’s 80 years energetic and delivering out this message! In the same way Cardijn would get on the rostrum and say ‘I am 80 years young!’ because if you actually believe the heart of the gospel message, if we actually begin to understand Catholic social thinking – the unique value of every single person – I cannot see how we can fail to be radical. I cannot see how we can fail to challenge injustice. I cannot see how the Church can ignore the cries of the poor on its doorstep, because if it does it fails to live out the very task the Lord has called it to do: to give witness and reality to God’s love for the world in and through your lives and through your work.

Catholic social teaching is not a set of documents just for the higher echelons, for the Cardinals, for the bishops, for the priests. It is primarily for you and for me. For the reality of whether Catholic social teaching comes alive in our communities, in our homes, in the intimacies of the darkest recesses of our lives, is down to you. If the YCW ever taught me anything it was that *I am responsible* for the vocation in the world, for living out, or at least attempting to live out our faith with hope, joy and love.

What does it demand of us to be a ‘Church for the poor’? First and foremost it demands a relationship with the poor. It demands that we build new structures in our Church and in our communities so that the poor of our communities are part of the shaping of the Church. If *we* miss that, we all miss it, because we are the Church together, and not apart. It’s not a task for ‘them up there’ it’s a task for all of us. I believe that passionately because if we don’t move together not just as a Catholic community but a shared faith community, then actually we deny the heritage on which our world should be based.

So the heart of Catholic social thinking is based upon the infinite value of every single human being. Is it any wonder therefore that before Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum,* which no doubt in my mind has Manning’s fingerprints all over it, that he was the one who fought it out in North America when one of the US Catholic unions (the Knights of Labor) was close to being proscribed, an action that would have alienated the Catholic bishops in America from the working people. It was Manning who Leo XIII trusted to intervene to stop that happening.

What is this ‘common good’ that we are called to serve? Joe Kirwan (Principal of Plater Trust College), who I had the great privilege of studying under, said one of the best definitions of the Common Good was that it is ‘a search for, and maintenance of, all those necessary conditions to enable people to become more fully human’. All those necessary conditions, whether that is health and safety at work, decent housing, decent pay, a good work environment, work itself, education, training, access to the fruits of the Earth equally. All those things that will enable us to flourish; to be who we’re meant to be. Creative, artistic, poetic, joyful beings in the world, giving hope.

I had the opportunity at the GMB conference recently to put a question to a potential Minister of State for Employment if there is a change of government next year. I asked her a question about whether a new government would ban zero-hours contracts in public procurement contracts. The answer was that it’s a matter of choice for people. Isn’t that interesting in the light of what we’d heard about dock managers justifying conditions in the dock strike back in 1889? “It’s a matter of choice”.

Those things that offend the dignity of the human person cannot be right. How can we in the modern world still issue a contract that doesn’t guarantee the number of hours of work and at times only minimum pay? Is that better? We might not put them in pens anymore, but many workers are still trying to secure the basic conditions to enable them to live a decent life. This doesn’t meet the standards of the test of the “common good”, so whom does it serve? Catholic social thinking asks: what is the primary objective of the economy? *To serve the person*: the person is for work, not the work for the person. Everything has to be oriented towards the needs and the dignity of the human person and as so often we start from the economic end and work towards the person. Start with the dignity of people and build systems that honour this dignity.

Would Manning be happy today that we are going to see a massive growth in the poverty of those who retire? Would he be happy in seeing our pension schemes destroyed? Would he be happy to see larger and larger proportions of people’s wages being eaten up in child care costs? We need to be asking these very questions. I’m convinced that if *we* don’t ask them, who is? It starts with relationships and building community, or to use another word – solidarity.

We’re called to be priests, prophets and kings. We’re called to read the ‘signs of the times’, to read them in the light of Catholic social thinking, to read and interpret them in the reality of our everyday experience. Don’t think that Catholic social teaching is ahead of us. It’s always catching up with us. Because through our lives, through our experience, through our daily work, insofar as you try to live out that simple message that the dignity of the human person is supreme because God loves them…you write Catholic social teaching. You create it and make it real.

That’s why I’m delighted to work with CSAN, Caritas Anchor House and the other Catholic agencies, because together there is tremendous witness. I always say that the trade union movement is probably the UK’s largest voluntary movement ever. Thousands upon thousands are committed to serve people and many have been motivated and influenced by Catholic and Christian faith traditions. Cardijn used to say the YCW is born when one young worker discovers another next to them and loves them. That is when Catholic social teaching comes alive.

We must make sure the Church has open ears to listen to the voice of the poor. We must make sure we build the structures for the poor to shape the Church. Baptism gives us this responsibility, not an instruction from high, it is what the Lord intended for us, our purpose and our task. I agree with Pope Francis when he says if we are going to do anything, let’s do it with joy, because we sometimes live as though we have already lost! He was also right that if we worry too much about the weeds we’ll never sow any wheat. So go out and sow, understand a little bit about Catholic social teaching but don’t study it too long. The best thing is – go and do it.

***Questions***

**Housing—what are your thoughts on the housing crisis and the issue of ‘affordable housing’?**

*Kevin Flanagan*

The new form of trade unionism, the new ‘community unionism’, is trying to find ways in which we can ensure that people can access reasonably priced finance. But I can also see a day when trades unions are helping to build houses for the working poor. I’m appalled that the bedroom tax in some instances could be the new land clearance whereby those properties that people can’t afford to live in anymore are then being exploited by others. There is a role for the government to step in and declare that it’s not in the interests of the common good.

***Politics and young people—how do you engage students and young people in politics?***

The YCW method of See, Judge, Act is a process of gentle discernment, and can help young people take responsibility and reflect on the reality of their own lives in the light of the gospel. Cardijn would say that without the action, the seeing and judging has little purpose. As a young man in the YCW one of the first actions I did was to knock on doors in a block of flats to interview people and ask what life was like to live in the flats. I was very quickly politicised and began to understand the world a bit more. The YCW brought the world to my door, and so their impact movement, campaigns and models are well worth looking at.

The one thing ‘See, Judge, Act’ gave me was a method of analysis which I still apply today: a “review of life”. It’s a powerful weapon when you actually understand it. It’s not just about understanding politics, it’s about understanding the mechanisms, the ability and the leadership that one needs to develop to engage effectively.