

**BROTHER EXUPERIEN  
AND CHRISTIAN TRADE UNIONS  
IN THE CONTEXT  
OF «RERUM NOVARUM»  
(1/2)**

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The excellent *Positio super virtutibus* (Rome, 1984) which the Congregation for the Causes of Saints devoted to Adrien Mas, known in religion as Brother Exuperien (1829-1905), was quite right in attributing to this Brother of the Christian Schools an important role in the rise of the Christian trade union movement and in the process leading to *Rerum Novarum*. Adrien Mas was educated at the Pensionnat de l'Immaculee Conception run by the Brothers at Beziers. Filled with enthusiasm by their example, he joined their novitiate in Toulouse. After the novitiate, he returned to Beziers and remained ten years there, training the pupils "in piety and knowledge", putting "his whole heart" into this work. He then became novice master, and his fellow-Brothers appointed him Assistant to the Superior General who was living at the time in Paris at 27 rue Oudinot, a building now occupied by the Ministry for Overseas Departments and Territories. He remained in this job for 32 years. During this period, his zeal for spiritual retreats and pious associations was equalled only by his concern for social justice as a source of peace. This he pursued by means of various schemes and associations for workers and people in employment. "L'Oeuvre des Apprentis", created in 1843 by Vicount Armand of Melun and Brother Philippe, was transformed by the energy of Brother Exuperien who made it part of a larger group called "Oeuvres de Jeunesse". Its spirit was kept alive by a newsletter. In 1882, the spiritual elite of parish youth clubs joined Brother Assistant, Fr. Chaumont and the chaplain of the Incurables in forming the Saint Labre Society which was dedicated to evangelical poverty and devotion to the Eucharist. Not long afterwards, the Employees' Trade Union was born there.

In the meantime, in 1873, Albert de Mun started up Catholic Workers' Clubs which were open to employers. This was the very opposite of the class

struggle. Eleven years later, a minister, Waldeck Rousseau, authorised the creation of "professional trade unions" with the following proviso: employers and workers were to have separate unions. It would be a long time before bridges were rebuilt to any degree. There was another legal restriction: these trade unions were to be totally free of religion, politics or ideology. In 1885, La Tour du Pin, a pilgrim to the Holy See in a group led by Leon Harmel, was received in audience by the Pope. This is how he described the occasion:

"On the fifth day after my arrival...I was admitted into the presence of the Sovereign Pontiff and knelt at his feet, alone with him in a small room...His Holiness began to speak about the apostolate of the clubs...He added: "It's very good, but keep your simple name of Apostolate of Catholic Workers' Clubs as it is." He smiled when he heard of the accusations of socialism that were being levelled at our way of doing things. "But it isn't socialism, it's Christianity." When I informed him that the very value of the expression 'Christian social order' was being questioned, he said with feeling: "They don't know what Christian social order is. But don't worry. Wait for my next encyclical. The Pope will speak. He will say that there is a Christian social order." Then softening his tone and resuming his expression of ineffable goodness, he added: "You asked me for a cardinal to oversee and, where necessary, direct your work. Well, I'll give you two. I'll set up a commission for social studies, and like that you'll find in Rome all that your faith has led you to seek there." (A. Murat, "Le catholicisme social en France" Bordeaux, 1980, p.84)

The following year there appeared *Immortale Dei* on the Christian constitution of states.

Around 1887, Brother Hieron started up a union in Paris for shop and industrial employees. Brother Exuperien gave him his full support. By Lasallian tradition, the Brothers ran vocational schools, apprenticeship centres, extra Sunday courses because they wished to serve all "the artisans and the poor" without exception. The students who followed these courses found themselves mixed in with a variety of social classes. In their schools, pupils joined not because they were poor or rich but because of vocational reasons. To a great extent, the social and religious attitude of the Brothers of the time was due to the work of Brother Exuperien. This is borne out by the words of Michel Launay, a university historian:

"Let us remember straightaway that their intention is to train not only minds but also characters...The pupils of the Brothers are not only taught. After school they are followed up...This is the spirituality of the Congregation. The Brother lives completely in community, totally, without any chance of taking refuge in a touchy reserve, with no possibility of evading common responsibilities, with no refuge in a secret garden. Meals taken in common are an opportunity for ex-

pressing joy, for making cutting remarks about others, for public exhortations to work hard and to have a burning faith. The Congregation is permeated with an atmosphere of genuine brotherhood, of astonishing spiritual health." (M. Launay. "La C.F.T.C., origines et developpement", Paris, Sorbonne, 1986.)

On September 13th 1887, 18 young men, inspired by the leadership of Br. Hieron and the President of the Union of Parish Commercial Youth Clubs, started up the Trade Union of Shop and Industrial Employees (S.E.C.I.), taking as their patrons Saint Labre and the Archangel Michael, as a sign of the religious character they wished to give their undertaking. On November 15th 1890, the first issue of their newsletter L'Employe came out. The second issue appeared on March 15th 1891, two months before the publication of *Rerum Novarum*. When the leaders and main inspirers of the S.E.C.I., and these included Brothers Hieron and Exuperien, realised that almost all its members would always remain wage earners, they gave up their initial ideal which was to promote workers and employees to positions of administrative responsibility by means of in-service training. Their aims became more modest and more suited to an often hostile social environment: to help workers defend their rights once they had firmly established them; to remedy inequalities created by the social situation of their parents, the power of money, and the difficulties which militated against secure jobs...Ever aware of the benefits of friendly relations with Christian employers and lawyers, L'Employe began a series in 1896 entitled "Views of a proletarian". In the meantime, two encyclicals had appeared: *Rerum Novarum*, on social questions, and *Au milieu des sollicitudes de l'Eglise universelle* (February 16th 1892) which preached support for the Republic. More than ever before, Brother Joseph, Superior General, and his Assistants of whom Brother Exuperien was the chief, called upon the Brothers and all their pupils or disciples to show perfect submission

to the Sovereign Pontiff in imitation of their Founder John Baptist de La Salle who had been beatified in 1888. Relations with Leo XIII had been close since the March 1885 private audience. Informed about the recruitment of the Brothers, their religious and professional training, and the variety of their work, he traced out a way forward for them: they should organise themselves, fight, train regiments of well-disciplined apprentices, workers and students; snatch souls away from the dangers of isolation, "give back to the Christian masses the feeling of brotherly solidarity" (G. Rigault, "Histoire generale de l'Institut des Freres des ecoles chretiennes", vol. VII, p.415). In his Circular dated December 18th 1892, Brother Joseph, helped by his Council, writes:

"In the midst of the sadness and tribulations of the present time...we acclaim (on the 50th anniversary of his consecration as bishop) Leo XIII, Vicar of Jesus Christ, Infallible Guardian of the Faith, Father and King of our souls; we glorify in him the Incomparable Doctor who continues to enlighten the world by his Immortal Encyclicals...the defender of the poor and working classes, the one who has been justly named the Pope of the workers. May Heaven grant him to see crowned with success so much work for the prosperity of the Church, for the good of society and for that of the working class in particular."

The Circular dated January 1st 1893 rejoices at the work that has been accomplished: "Youth organisations have been set up in great numbers (and not only in Paris, far from that): an effort has been made to turn these into true centres of Christian life, where the frequentation of the sacraments, monthly recollections, and annual retreats and practices of piety have kept our former pupils faithful to their duties and in many cases have made them, in their parishes, the collaborators of their parish priest, the supporters or even the organisers of works of zeal and charity."