

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

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When Brother Gabriel Marie succeeded Brother Joseph as Superior General in 1897, Brother Exuperien remained the chief Assistant. He was responsible for the former students' associations in France which numbered 31,200 young people. At the time of the World Fair of 1900, there were 35,572 of them spread over 350 parish youth clubs (G. Rigault, *op. cit.* VII, p.417). Brother Exuperien always remained involved in this work as one of the leading organisers of all these Lasallian undertakings. This was not only in Paris and the departement of the Seine, but also in Lille, Rouen, Boulogne, Calais, Saint Omer, Orleans, Nantes, Beauvais, Laon, Lyon, Bordeaux and finally in nearly all the departments of France, putting into practice the words of Leo XIII to Brother Joseph: "Each school establishment should be matched, except when absolutely impossible, by a youth club."

This widespread influence among young adults, complemented by that of Old Boys associations which also were permeated with the same spirit of understanding between employers and employees and commitment to the preferential service of the less privileged, owes much to the religious life developed by Brother Exuperien among the Brothers and their friends. The main meetings, recollections, and annual spiritual retreats of the St. Labre Association were held in the retirement home of the Brothers at Athis Mons, near the present-day Orly Airport, in an area which was particularly tranquil and lightly wooded at the time. It was from the St. Labre group that the Employees' trade union took most of its most dynamic organisers. Daily family prayers and inter-social class discussions on the basis of pontifical pronouncements found constant nourishment there. The collaboration

of fervent and devoted priests like Fr. Paguelle of Follenay and Canon Peuportier reflect the common desire to work as a Church, with priests and non-consecrated lay people working together with the Brothers who were canonically defined as lay religious. There is no better description of the situation than the one found in Michel Launay's doctoral thesis based on extensive and scientific research:

"All those who at the end of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th century became leaders of or held positions of responsibility in Christian trade unions in France were all, in their youth, energetic members of St. Labre and conscious of belonging to an elite...One must constantly bear in mind that the Christian trade union movement in France came directly from the congregation of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, and that in this way a whole range of ideas, concerns, reflexes, thoughts were transmitted, at least at management level, through this trade union movement." (*op. cit.* p.12).

It is important to add at this point that the talks, private conversations, the exchange of correspondence of Brother Exuperien were, up to the year of his death, 1905, the golden thread that bound strongly together the spiritual and the temporal, secular, social and economic training on the one hand and religious studies on the other. In this connection we must mention the important part played by the chief Assistant of the Superior in the preparation and publication of a series of doctrinal works intended for the para-theological formation of the young Brothers. There were three volumes of about 500 pages each, entitled Dogma, Moral, Worship, the work of "a seminary lecturer". The volume on Moral does not omit to speak of the workers. The table of contents refers to pages 329-332: "Situation of workers in our days brought about by the abandonment of faith and corruption of morals; duties imposed by justice which they should practise; institutions through which the Church works to remedy their situation; duties of the State with regard to what concerns the situation of the workers." The really essential message would have been missing if the following were not also included relating to employers: "Teachings of the Church intended for the rich; duties imposed by justice which employers should practise; justice must be complemented by charity." The chapter in question is entitled: "Duties of workers and employers" with two sub-headings: "Causes of conflict between workers and employers" and "Remedy for social antagonism". A long quotation from the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* is studied by questions and answers. This approach makes it easier to explain and memorise each separate section of the quotation. The first edition appeared in 1894. This work served as the basis for the formation of the Brothers, their pupils and disciples up to the middle of the 20th century.

Because of the links established by the Brothers in France with the world of technology and industry, the

members of the 1901 General Chapter were sufficiently conditioned to greet enthusiastically the creation of the Istituto De Merode in Rome, founded by the Pope accepted from him by the Superior General and his Assistants. Here is what the Superior said on this occasion:

"On the initiative of our Holy Father the Pope, we have been offered the direction of the Pontifical Technical Institute, known as the Istituto De Merode. This is a kind of small university which aims to prepare young people for the liberal technical professions such as those of engineer, architect, science teachers. It prepares also for entry into military and naval academies. This establishment could be called the crowning glory of our vocational and technical schools" (Athis, Circular, October 25th 1901, p.75).

The Christian trade union movement has a debt of gratitude to several eminent laymen trained in the spirit of Brothers Hieron and Exuperien. One such person is Jules Zirnheld, born in 1876 in Alsace, taught by the Brothers in Paris, an accountant at 15, a member of the St. Labre Association and of the S.E.C.I. of which he became the president in 1892. Another is Charles Viennet, a Parisian born in 1878, a pupil of the Brothers, a business legal secretary, attending regularly the talks given by the Comte de Segur at the youth

club attached to the school on rue St. Dominique. He, like Zirnheld, was totally overwhelmed by Rerum Novarum which they both read in their study group. He joined the S.E.C.I. and became its general secretary. Like the Brothers, and as the Pope had urged, he rallied to the defence of the Republic. He fulfilled his patriotic duty by joining up in 1914 and died the following year on the field of battle. Gaston Tessier, born in Paris in 1887, began to earn his living as soon as he left the Brothers' school. He continued his studies thanks to courses for adults and joined the St. Labre Association and the S.E.C.I. For the latter he wrote an article which was taken up by many other publications. In the article, entitled "The future of the employee", the future of the white-collar worker is shown to be brighter than that of the manual worker. He had established his reputation: henceforth the power and wisdom of his thinking were recognised. Soon after, he was called upon to take over as president of the union. This led to the foundation of the C.F.T.C. (French Confederation of Christian Workers). However, this happened after the death of Brother Exuperien in 1905. This story is sufficient to illustrate even now how a small seed sown at the time of Rerum Novarum was able to influence a whole area of personal relationships in the working world.