

CHALLENGE TO ACTION

Addresses of

Monsignor Joseph Cardijn
(Founder and Chaplain of the Young Christian Workers)

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INTRODUCTION

By Father Langdale

Joseph Cardijn, eldest son of Henri Cardijn and Louise van Daelen, was born on November 13th, 1882, at Schaerbeek, a district of Brussels, where his parents were employed as caretakers of a small block of flats. Madame Cardijn's state of health did not allow her to nurse her child, and young Joseph was entrusted to the care of his grandparents, who lived at Hal, a small Flemish town to the South of Brussels, on the borders of Brabant and Hainault. His parents joined him there a few years later, and his father took up a coal merchant's business – a very modest affair, which gave to the family a relative degree of prosperity and independence.

The Childhood and adolescence of Joseph Cardijn were spent in a typical Christian home of Flanders. Monsieur Cardijn, his father, could neither read nor write, but he was a man of high principle and deep religious conviction. His children were brought up strictly, and Mgr. Cardijn has told us how one long whistle up the stairs was a sufficient reveille when he was due to serve Mass at the Parish Church. He does not tell us what happened if a second call was needed!

Joseph Cardijn began his education at the elementary school with working-class boys of the little town. The impact of industrial development was making itself in Flanders, and Hal was fast becoming the center of an industrial district. When Joseph was about to leave school his parents naturally thought of placing him in a factory, but the lad had other ambitions. This is how he has told the story of his vocation:

“It was the eve of my entry into the factory. I went up to the bedroom with my brothers and sisters. When they were all in bed, I crept down barefoot to the kitchen, where my father and mother, in spite of the late hour, were talking by the fireside.

“ ‘Father’, said I, ‘there's I want to ask you. Please let me continue my studies!’

“ ‘But you know well enough’, answered my father, ‘that you are the eldest, and that we rely on you to help us in bringing up your brothers and sisters’.

“But I insisted: ‘Dad, I've felt within me a call from God. I want to be a priest.’

‘I saw two great tears roll down my father's cheeks, and mother became whiter than the kitchen wall. At last my father said to my mother:

“ ‘Woman, we have already worked hard, but to have that joy, we shall work harder still.’”

And so Joseph Cardijn was sent to continue his studies at the college of Notre Dame de Hal. In September 1903, he entered the Malines Seminary, and one day a message arrived that his father was dying;

“I left at once, and on entering the room where my poor father lay dying, I knelt beside him and received his blessing from his old, wrinkled hands, worn by ceaseless toil.

Before that man who was so valiant, so great, I swore to give myself entirely to die for the working class.”

He now saw the purpose of his vocation; he was to become a priest to give Christ to the working masses, to reveal to the workers their temporal and eternal destiny. Ever since his boyhood the problem of the working classes had haunted him. “When fifty years ago I entered the junior seminary,” he told us recently, “my schoolmates went out to work. They were intelligent, decent, God-fearing. When I came back for my holidays they were coarse, corrupted and lapsed from the Church - whilst I was becoming a priest. I started to make inquiries, it became the obsession of my life. How did it come about that young lads brought up by Christian parents in Christian schools should be lost in a few months?” to the solution of this enigma he was to devote the whole of his life, but it took him many years to discover the means of fulfilling his vocation.

Joseph Cardijn was ordained priest on September 22nd, 1906, and was sent to follow a course of sociology and political science at the university of Louvain. But the following year he was recalled to his diocese and appointed to teach at the junior seminary of Base-Wavre. He had not forgotten the problems of the working class, and he devoted his summer holidays to traveling abroad, studying working conditions in Germany, France and England, where he visited Manchester, London and Sheffield and made a close study of Trade Union organization, meeting Tom Mann and Ben Tillert. His impression of Ben Tillert is particularly interesting as it shows that, as far back as 1912, his mind was already working on the lines which were to result, some twenty years later, in the foundation of the Young Christian Workers:

“If we follow Ben Tillert during his twenty-four years of social work, it seems that two ideas have crystallized his aspirations and, like two guiding stars, have directed his efforts towards a better future: *first of all, he wishes to create the most powerful, strongest, most united organization possible, in which the workers of the will feel the solidarity of their interest and the invincible power of their union: secondly, he sets out to enable each worker in particular to educate his own individuality, to uplift himself morally and intellectually, so that he may feel the pressing need of more well-being and more justice.*”

It was during one of his visits to England that he met Baden-Powell, then at the height of his fame as the founder of Scouting. Baden-Powell explain to him the Scout ideals and methods, and suggested to Father Cardijn that he should start the movement in Belgium. But though he felt an intense admiration for the educative value of Scout training, Cardijn realized that it did not hold the solution to his own preoccupations: “I expounded to Baden-Powell,” he tells us, “the concrete and practical problems of the life and work of the young workers. Baden-Powell admitted that he had never looked at the problem in that way, and that Scouting could not solve this concrete and practical problem.”

In 1912, a very severe bout of illness put an end to his teaching career. Hardly convalescent, he was appointed curate at Laeken, on the outskirts of Brussels. The parish priest could hardly conceal his disappointment when he first met his new assistant: “All the parish organizations are topsy-turvy, and they send me a sick man!” it was not long before he formed a different opinion of Father Cardijn.

It was true that the parish organizations were in a bad way. The working Men’s Club boasted of a bowls team and little else; the Girls’ Club, with a membership of thirty,

offered innocent amusements to its members and a play at Christmas. No other working organizations existed in the parish. Father Cardijn was put in charge of the girls, and his first concern was to transform the club. Within a year he had raised the membership to 160 and had founded study-circles at which, for the first time, problems of work were discussed. This caused a mild revolution in the parish, where talk about these matters was considered dangerous and unsettling. But the young curate went still further. He founded for the young seamstresses a branch of the Needleworkers' Trade Union, and started for the adults a section of the League of Christian Women Workers, which in a few years achieved a membership of over a thousand. He also founded a study circles of working lads. From this group were to come the first three leaders of the Young Christian Workers – Ferdinand Tonnet, Paul Garcet, Jacques Meert.

Those years were a period of ceaseless activity and experiment. Father Cardijn was not a mere theorist, he did not start off with preconceived ideas and try to force them upon reality. He was also ready to try new methods over and over again until they achieved real formative results. The War did not interrupt his efforts. In 1915, whilst remaining curate at Laeken, he was appointed Director of Social Work for district of Brussels by Cardinal Mercier. On two occasions he was imprisoned by the Germans for patriotic activities, and during several months spent in the prison-cells he was able to meditate upon his experiences and to outline what was to become the methods of the Young Christian Workers. In 1919 he left Laeken and was able to devote himself full-time to social work in Brussels.

A number of Trade Union leaders had come to realize the need for grouping together young workers. The pioneers trained by Father Cardijn formed the nucleus of this new movement, which in 1919 took the name of *La Jeunesse Syndicaliste* (the Young Trade-Unionists). For the next few years it developed slowly, finding its way and establishing its methods, and meeting with a great deal of opposition, even, it is said, from the Cardinal Archbishop of Malines. Catholic Belgium possessed a strong network of traditional organizations, and this movement of young workers was looked upon a dangerous and revolutionary innovation. But it managed to break through every prejudice and misunderstanding. In 1924, the *Jeunesse Syndicaliste* became the *Jeunesse Ouvriere Chretienne*, the Young Christian Workers, and Father Cardijn was appointed its National Chaplain by the Belgian bishops. In March, 1925, Pope Pius XI received in audience the founder of Young Christian Workers, and gave to the movement the final sanction of the Church. Cardijn has often told the story of this momentous interview. "Here at last," said the Pope, "is someone who comes to speak to me about the masses! The greatest scandal of the nineteenth century was the loss of the workers to the Church. The Church needs the workers, and the workers need the Church."

It is not our purpose to tell in any detail the subsequent history of the Young Christian Workers; its astonishing development in Belgium, where it became in a very short while the most powerful youth movement in the country; its growth in France, its spread in other countries, including England and the English-speaking world. One writes the history of something that is past, whereas the Y.C.W. is a living thing, one of the most vital forces, perhaps, in contemporary Catholicism. It is at present established in more than 62 countries; it groups over a million and a half young workers of every race, colour and nationality. Its founder has become a world famous personality, and his name is venerated by young workers all over the world. Few men have been able to achieve so

much in their lifetime. When Father Cardijn started his first small group of working lads over thirty years ago, he said to them: "We are setting out to conquer the world." Today the Y.C.W. International has become a reality. It has taken its place among the great world organizations, it can speak for working youth with the prestige and authority of an international movement.

The writings collected together in this book will, we hope, give a clear idea of the mind and spirit of the founder of the Young Christian Workers. The reader will be struck by the dynamism, enthusiasm, the freshness of vision of the man. His greatness does not lie in having discovered anything new; it consists essentially in having restated, with uncommon force and genius, truths as old as Christianity itself, truths which many of us had almost forgotten. In a period of the Church's life which mark by a new development of the lay apostolate, he stands out as one of the most significant figures of modern Catholicism.

THREE TRUTHS

26th August 1935

Three fundamental truths dominate and illumine the problem of the working youth of the world. They inspire, explain, and direct us towards the solution that the Y.C.W. has to give:

1. **A truth of faith.** The eternal and temporal destiny of each young worker in particular and of all the young workers in general.
2. **A truth of experience.** The terrible contradiction which exists between the real state of the young workers and this eternal and temporal destiny.
3. **A truth of pastoral practice or method.** The necessity of a Catholic organization of young workers with a view to the conquest of their eternal and temporal destiny.

Of all eternity, through an infinite gift of His goodness, God has predestined each young worker in particular, and all young workers to share in His Nature, His Life, His Love, His Divine Happiness. He has decided to give Himself to communicate Himself to them, to make them live of His own life, enlighten them with His Truth, to give them a share of His Kingdom.

Young workers are not machines, or animals or slaves. They are the sons, the collaborators, the heirs of God. "He gave them power to become the sons of God... partakers of the Divine Nature." That is their sole true destiny, the reason of their existence, their life, and their work, the source of all their rights and all their duties.

This destiny is not two-fold: on the one hand eternal, and on the other temporal, without any link or influence of one upon the other. There cannot be an eternal destiny by the side, at a distance from earthly life, unrelated to it. A destiny cannot be disincarnate, any more than religion can be disincarnate. No, eternal destiny is incarnate in time, begun in time, develops, is achieved, is fulfilled in time, in the whole earthly life, in all its aspects, all its applications, all its achievements; physical, intellectual, moral, sentimental, professional, social, public life. Daily life, concrete and practical. Eternal destiny can no more be separated from temporal destiny than religion is separated from morality. "And the word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us." The eternal destiny of each human being is incarnate, develops, and is achieved in temporal life – always and everywhere – on earth as it is in heaven.

It is not a question of continuity, it is one and the same destiny. The destiny of the little servant girl, the young apprentice, in their normal environment, the framework, the atmosphere of their life; in the midst of all their comrades, their closest neighbors, whom they must help conquer their temporal and eternal destiny.

This fundamental truth, which cannot be repeated too often, is the basis of the whole Y.C.W.; but one must look at it with a total and absolute faith to see its revolutionary value. "Send forth thy spirit, and thou shalt renew the face of the earth."

The life, the actual conditions of existence of the mass of young workers is in terrible contradiction with their eternal and temporal destiny. We must have the courage to face this reality, just as we must always face the reality of their eternal and temporal destiny. We must remain with our eyes fixed to heaven and our feet on earth, as

inexorable for the brutality of the conditions of earthly life as we are inexorable for the demands of eternal destiny. We must realize the age, the conditions of work, the influence of environment, the problems to be solved in isolation, in loneliness, in experience. Present conditions increase the tragic aspect of the opposition between the two realities; unemployment, crisis, impossibility of founding a home, of bringing up children. And all this in a wave of neo-paganism unexampled in history.

There can be no external or arbitrary solution; the only solution is one of conquest organized by the young workers and taking into account their eternal and temporal destiny. We must not look for something external to working youth. No solution can be found in the clergy, in the parents, in school masters, in employers, in public authorities. All these may and must help; but they cannot take the place of the young workers. This is their own affair. Nor can we expect a solution from the transformation of professional, economic or political regimes. This may either be an obstacle or a help. But the most ideal regime is not sufficient. We want men, we want human action, human conquest.

Neither can we have an arbitrary solution for the young workers: some organizations with a fancy training, outside life, environment and the masses. An organization of this kind may have some success and attract for a time, but it cannot solve the problem because it is outside it. Only an organization of young workers with a view to the conquest of their eternal and temporal destiny can solve the essential and vital problem which faces each and all young workers. An organization for young workers, by young workers, between young workers.

An organization for the conquest of their life, their environment, a conquest of the masses with a view to their eternal and temporal destiny – with a view to their destiny which is at once double and unique.

And for this, an organization which is adapted and specialized to the age, conditions of life, the future, the eternal and temporal destiny of the young workers.

An organization which is local, regional and national, united, disciplined, autonomous, living, conquering, capable of influencing and leading the masses of the young workers in their daily life and their normal environment.

An organization which is at once inseparably a school, a service, a representative body.

A school of conquest of their lay life, of the whole of their personal, family, social, moral, religious life, with a programme of life, in a state of life, for a condition of life.

Not a school in a laboratory, a kind of seminary, a class-room; but in and for real and daily life, with its real problems and its real difficulties.

A school of conquest of their environment, of their lay environment, in the absence of, and apart from, the priest in the real environment which is the framework, the atmosphere, the support of their life; not only physical environment but also human or inhuman environment; not an artificial environment made for and by the organization, but an environment by life and for life.

A school of conquest for the mass of the young workers. Nor for a minority, for the privileged few, deserters from the masses; but for the true, local, regional and national mass.

Not for a vague and anonymous mass, but for the definite mass whose address, profession, lodging, age, name, Christian name, difficulties, life, are known.

Not only a school, but also and at the same time a service. The organization not only aims at training and educating. It sustains, it helps, it renders service. It trains and educates by rendering service, by teaching to render service; it is a school assistance, of fraternal defense. Isolated, dispersed, individual conquest is impossible or ineffective under the actual conditions of modern life. And for this reason, too, we need an organization which is representative body, capable of acting and having influence over public and private authorities, and on public opinion; possessing powerful means of action, through the Press, rallies, congresses, petitions; but also being in itself a testimony and having representative value through the transformation it effects in the life and conduct of each leaders, its members, their families, and working youth.

A body representative of the conquest it is achieving within itself; a body representative of the demands of eternal and temporal destiny; which is a revolution in travail through the irresistible force it bears within itself.

It is often asked whether this organization is the organization of an elite or an organization of the masses. This question seems meaningless to me. The distinction can only exist in the minds of those who do not live the movement. An organization for the conquest of life and environment is necessarily and essentially both an organization for the elite and an organization for the masses. Both are necessary to one another. A real organization of the masses is impossible without a powerful organization and training of the elite. No organization has more need of an elite, well trained, influential and active, than an organization of the masses, but it should be an elite taken from the masses and acting in the masses, not a distant separate elite. We must have leaders who are with, near, and for, their men in the trenches, at the front, in battle.

It should be an organization using active methods which move to action the elite and the masses, watching or listening to speakers or so-called leaders. But masses sharing in a team spirit and in team work in all the life, all the training, all the campaigns, all the achievements, all the services, all the conquest of the movement.

Leaders and members learning to *see*, *judge*, and *act*; to see the problem of their temporal and eternal destiny; to judge the present situation, the problems, the contradiction, the demands of an eternal and temporal destiny; to act with a view to the conquest of their temporal and eternal destiny. To act individually and collectively, in a team, in a local section, in a regional federation, in a national movement, in meetings, in achievement, in life and in their environment, forming a single front, going forward to the conquest of the masses of their fellow-workers.