

Cardinal Manning and the Social Problem

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In the Spring of 1887, at a time when industrial strife was assuming dangerous proportions in many parts of the western world, the Holy See was called upon to adjudicate in a case concerning the status of an American trade union popularly known as the Knights of Labour. The decision then taken has probably had an important and beneficent effect on the relations between the Church and organized labour since that time. It brought to an end a long and difficult controversy in which Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore had taken the leading part, and in which his liberal policy had been ably supported by the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster.

The question in dispute was whether the practices and the objectives of this society were inimical to faith and morals, and whether it should be condemned by the Church, and Catholic workingmen forbidden to join it. Very much depended upon the answer to that question. It was, said Cardinal Gibbons, "a link in the great chain of the social problem of our day"; and the consequences of the decision would be of the greatest importance for generations to come. But it was not a simple matter to decide. From the evidence that is now available it can be seen that the society in question, known originally as the Holy and Noble Order of the Knights of Labour, was a harmless, if in some respects a rather unusual organization, formed for perfectly legitimate purposes, and conducted in a manner which threatened nothing more serious than the possible curtailment of the undue power which the employers of the time held over their workers, and which in too many cases they used in ways that had little to do with the Christian ideals of justice and charity.

That was not so clear in 1887. Trade unionism in any form was still suspect; and there were certain features of this particular union which rendered the charges made by its many opponents not wholly implausible. Cardinal Gibbons, who was better informed on the realities of the situation than were many of his colleagues, saw behind all this. But there were others who did not; and among the leaders of the Church in the United States and Canada there was honest difference of opinion about a society which veiled its proceedings in secrecy, and about which all manner of wild and alarming rumours were assiduously circulated. The authorities in Rome were confronted with a mass of conflicting evidence from which it was not easy to discern the truth.

One of the strongest opponents of the society was Archbishop Taschereau. Like many other American unions the Knights had spread into Canada, and in the early 1880's a number of branches had been formed in Toronto, Montreal and other industrial centres. By many, perhaps by most of the Canadian clergy, this development was not regarded with disfavour. Archbishop Lynch of Toronto openly approved the movement; and many of the priests in Montreal encouraged workmen to join the society, while warning them against violence or any other action contrary to the teaching of the Church. But the Archbishop of Quebec soon came to take an adverse view; and in May, 1884, he secured from the Congregation of the Propaganda an order proscribing the society in the province, and forbidding Catholic workers to have anything to do with it.

That was an added complication. In effect the decision in 1887 involved the reversal of a judgment given very recently, and one in which it was stated, *inter alia*, that the Knights of Labour "ought to be considered among those societies prohibited by the Holy See." But in the light of fuller knowledge, provided mainly by Cardinal Gibbons and some other American bishops, it was determined that no good and much harm could result from the continuance of the ban in Quebec, and even more from its extension to the United States. The judgment was in consequence reversed; and within a few years Cardinal Gibbons' prediction that any problems which remained would shortly solve themselves by the disappearance of the Knights of Labour, was fully borne out.

In one view the action of the Papacy in this matter was purely negative. What Cardinal Gibbons requested, and what the decision amounted to, as it affected the situation in the United States, was simply that the Holy See refrained from issuing a formal ban against this particular trade union. It followed as a matter of course that the ban already imposed in Quebec would be withdrawn. But to the man whose influence may well have been the most important factor in securing this wise decision it was more than a mere negative achievement. It was a great positive victory for the forces of reason and justice in an area of human conflict where there was evident need that the forces of reason and justice should be made to prevail.

During most of his active life, and more particularly since his appointment as Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Manning had been recognized as one of the foremost champions of the working classes. Few men in a comparable position had a more intimate knowledge of the real nature of the social problem; and no one had been a more fearless or consistent advocate of the right of the workers to organize themselves in unions, and to employ every legitimate means of securing better wages, shorter hours and improved conditions of employment. His views on these subjects were considerably in advance of those of most ecclesiastics, and of all but a few of the leading public men of his time. By the 1880's his reputation as a social reformer and a friend of the poor and the neglected was at its height; and it had spread far beyond the borders of his own

country. It was a natural, and a very wise move on the part of the American bishops to solicit his support; and we have their own statements that his letters were perhaps the decisive factor in overcoming the fears of Cardinal Simioni and many of his colleagues, who were alarmed, not wholly without reason, at the spread of revolutionary socialism, and the increasing violence and bitterness engendered by industrial disputes.

There are very few references to the subject in the published correspondence of the English Cardinal; but the result could not but have been gratifying. In effect it meant the formal and public adoption by the Church of the ideas on this subject which he had long held, and which he had tried by every means in his power to persuade others to adopt. So far as it went – and it must be acknowledged that many Catholic leaders, including not a few in the College of Cardinals, ardently hoped that it did not go too far – it could be regarded as an endorsement of his life-long campaign on behalf of labour.

It was to be followed four years later by a more positive statement of principles in the great encyclical *Rerum Novarum*; and it is reasonable to assume that Cardinal Manning himself had some influence on the shaping of that document. At all events it embodied ideas on the natural rights of workmen and on the relations that should exist between them and their employers, which he had been advocating for the past generation. In his analysis of the encyclical, published in the *Dublin Review* in July, 1891, he pointed out one of the significant changes that had occurred as a result of the growth of the new industry. The guilds, those voluntary associations which had regulated the relations between employers and workers in the past, had been swept away; and nothing had taken their place.

“Hence, by degrees,” he observed, “it has come to pass that working men have been given over, isolated and defenseless, to the callousness of employers, and to the greed of unrestrained competition.”

He did not of course assume that all employers were callous, nor did he deny the value of competition, properly understood, and, where necessary, controlled by appropriate social action. But there was, in his judgment, nothing sacrosanct about this principle of competition; and he regarded with more than a little scepticism the adjective “free” which its defenders regularly affixed to it. Where its effects are seen to be harmful, it must, he declared, “like all human activity, be brought under proper regulation.”

“The economy of industry,” he wrote in 1890, “is governed by the supreme moral law, which checks, limits and controls all its operations.” To think otherwise, “to put labour and wages first and the human or domestic life of man second is to invert the order of God and nature and to ruin the society of man at its foundations.”

He was here discussing one particular effect of uncontrolled or ill-controlled

competition, viz., the excessive hours of labour, for women as well as for men, which still prevailed in many industries. That was a subject which constantly occupied his mind, and on which he expressed his views most frequently and most strongly. His first contact with the problem occurred in his early life as an Anglican clergyman in a remote country parish. He saw it in even darker form among the families of working men crowded into the slums of the great metropolis; and he never ceased to do battle for the right of the labourer, however humble his position, to those hours of leisure needed “to cultivate his mind and his soul.” If that right is denied, “if the hours of labour have no other limit but the gain of the employer, no workingman can live a life worthy of a human being.” Yet, he continues in a later passage, “it is to this that the political economy of the past fifty years is leading us.” His plea was for a wider view of the place of industry in human society. “A truer political economy,” he says, “would include all that concerns the general wealth and welfare of a people. It would rule and limit all the interests and activities of men organized in society. And it would rule them by the higher moral law, which is the law of nature and of God. First of all are to be maintained the great principles governing the life of man and of human society. Buying in the cheapest and selling in the dearest market are secondary and subordinate matters.”

Most people would doubtless have agreed with the principle. But to put it in these terms, to mix morality, at best a very uncertain matter, with business and industry, which were very certain and very important matters, was not quite good form in Victorian England; and the Cardinal came in for some very severe criticism. He was regularly denounced as a demagogue, a title which he rather enjoyed. “Were I not Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster,” he once remarked, “I should prefer to be a great demagogue.” His critics – and they were many – believed that he contrived fairly successfully to combine the two roles.

The most complete statement of his views on this and related subjects was his lecture on the Dignity and Rights of Labour, given originally at Leeds in 1877, and published in pamphlet form a decade later. The order of words in the title is significant. The dignity or worthiness of labour comes first. The rights are those privileges required to sustain that dignity; and they are here stated in very simple terms. “I claim for labour,” he said, “all the rights of property.” It would hardly have been possible in nineteenth-century England to put them on higher ground. He could quote Adam Smith in support of his argument that “the property which every man has in his own labour is of all forms of property the most sacred and inviolable.” But the conclusions which he drew from this premise differed from those held by most orthodox political economists. “Whatever rights capital possesses,” he declared, “Labour possesses in the same degree.” High among those rights he placed that of freely associating in trade unions; and he claimed for working men and their families the right to be protected by law against conditions which militated against their moral, as well

as their material well-being.

If material production, “the multiplying without stint of yards of cloth and cotton twist,” were the real end of life, then, he observed, there was nothing more to be said. But he looked beyond that to what were, in his judgment, more important considerations.

“If the domestic life of the people be vital above all, if the peace, the purity of homes, the education of children, the duties of wives and mothers, the duties of husbands and fathers be written into the natural law of mankind; and if these things are sacred, far beyond anything that can be sold in the market, then I say, if the hours of labour resulting from the unregulated sale of man's strength and skill shall lead to the destruction of domestic life, to the neglect of children, to turning wives and mothers into living machines and fathers and husbands into creatures of burden, who rise before the sun and come back when it is set, the domestic life of men exists no longer, and we dare not go on in this path.”

It need hardly be said that the Cardinal was addressing a nation that was not oblivious of, nor indifferent to these problems. His particular *bête noire*, “political economy,” did not rule so absolutely as might be inferred from many of his statements. What Carlyle called “the condition of the people question” had been kept pretty constantly before the public since attention had been directed sharply to it by the great Chartist movement half a century earlier; and a great deal had already been done to remedy the worst of the evils that had resulted from the first onrush of the new industrialism. Manning was fully aware of that, and he gave credit where credit was due. No other state, he declared, had done so much to protect the workers as Great Britain; and he pointed to a long list of factory acts and similar measures, designed to protect women and children, to reduce hours of labour in many industries, and to permit or facilitate the formation of unions, which had been passed during the preceding fifty years. But he was not wrong in believing that a great deal more was required. The reports on conditions in London and in some of the northern industrial towns published a few years later by Mr. Booth and Mr. Rountree, gave added point to much that he had to say on this subject.

From whatever angle he viewed this social problem – and all the ugly features of it were graven on his mind – he came back always to the central point, the need of preserving and safeguarding family life as the foundation of Christian society. He condemned the harsh and dehumanizing system of poor relief inaugurated by the Act of 1834. He urged the undertaking of useful public works to provide employment in periods of depression. He waged endless war against the excessive hours of labour required of workmen, and against the conditions which forced mothers to neglect their homes and their children in order to add their pittance of wages to the family income. He conducted a long and wholly unsuccessful campaign to persuade employers to enter into a

voluntary agreement fixing a principle of proportion between profits and wages. His plea was for the poor and the defenseless, even for those whom the more “scientific” students of the social problem dismissed as the worthless. His ideal was social peace and the creation of a community ruled by a higher law than that of the market-place. “Without this great moral law,” he said, “we should be a horde and not a nation. Without domestic life there can be no nation.”

Many of his proposals were condemned as socialism. He took the charge seriously enough to discuss it in one of his public lectures, and to suggest that what he proposed was the very antithesis of socialism, that it was indeed conservatism in its best and truest sense, since the purpose was to put an end to class conflict and to preserve and strengthen the foundations of social order. But as a rule he paid little heed to such criticism. He had witnessed, and had himself taken part in a good many controversies on these matters; and he was able to judge at their true value the awe-inspiring words bandied about in such contests.

When the Corn Laws were to be repealed, he remarked, when the food of the people was to be freed from the heavy tax imposed on it, it was called robbery. When the Irish Protestant Church was to be disestablished, and the Catholic peasantry freed from the obligation of paying tithes for its support, it was called spoliation. When, in the midst of the serious depression of the early 1880’s, the Irish Land Act was to be passed, and those same peasants relieved of some of the high rents which they paid for their potato ground, it was called confiscation. And when the world of labour is to be regulated by law, it is called socialism.

He did not greatly care what it was called, so long as something was done to achieve the object. “These things cannot go on,” he declared after a survey of the actual conditions in which large sections of the working population lived, especially in the slums of London. “These things ought not to go on. The accumulation of wealth in the land, the piling up of riches like mountains in the hands of classes or individuals cannot go on if these moral conditions of our people are not healed. No commonwealth can rest on such foundations.”

In a conversation with the late Hilaire Belloc, Cardinal Manning once remarked that “all human conflict is ultimately theological.” This particular conflict he saw always in terms of morality. He believed and he was not alone in believing – that society was drifting into moral chaos through this mad struggle for material wealth; and he spent a great deal of a busy and active life in an endeavour to check that drift, and to reaffirm the Christian principles of justice and charity. “The Church,” he said, in a letter to Bishop Keane in 1887, “is the mother, the friend, and the protector of the people.” Within the area committed to his charge he was determined that this should be something more than a pious maxim.

His ideas on the role of the Church as the friend and protector of the workers coincided very closely with those of Cardinal Gibbons. Both men sought

peace based on a concept of social justice very different from that which satisfied most of the possessing and conservative classes in their respective countries. Both were subjected to the same type of criticism by the timorous, the ill-informed and the reactionaries. Their association in defense of the Knights of Labour was natural. Their victory had important consequences for the Church and for Catholic working men everywhere, but particularly on this continent. Manning's influence in Rome was at its height during these years. It had recently been used, at the request of Sir John A. Macdonald, to aid in securing the elevation of Archbishop Taschereau to the College of Cardinals. It was now given with equal readiness to aid Gibbons in his defense of a society which the Canadian Cardinal regarded as a menace to Catholic life among the factory operatives of Montreal.

An immediate decision on the attitude of the Church towards this over-publicized union was necessary. The anomalous arrangement under which it was proscribed in one small province as a dangerous secret society, while being tolerated, if not openly approved by ecclesiastical authorities in almost every other part of the continent, could not be continued indefinitely. Had the leaders of the Church in America been able to agree unanimously on the policy to be adopted, the decision would have been left to them. The authorities in Rome had no desire to intervene in what appeared to them a matter of purely local interest, and one on which a mass of confused and contradictory evidence had given no very certain guide. Most of the American bishops supported Gibbons' tolerant policy of withholding censure and awaiting developments. But a certain number, probably encouraged by the ban in Quebec, and almost certainly unaware of the unpopularity of that measure among most Canadian ecclesiastics, favoured more positive action; and not all of these were especially reticent in making their opinions known to the public.

Cardinal Gibbons was gravely concerned about the situation in Quebec. But it lay beyond his province, and he ventured no criticism. Having, as he said, no personal knowledge of "labour troubles in Quebec," he concluded that "The Archbishop's hostility grew from some local laws of the Knights that were contrary to the doctrines of the Church." He was determined, however, to do all in his power to prevent the ban from being extended. His efforts to keep the question within the jurisdiction of the American metropolitans were frustrated, when, at a meeting held in Baltimore in October, 1886, the Archbishops of St. Louis and Santa Fe strongly opposed his policy. In accordance with a ruling previously laid down, the case was in consequence referred to Rome. One of the first steps taken by Gibbons and his associates was to secure Manning's aid.

Credit for the wise decision eventually reached goes primarily to Cardinal Gibbons and the American bishops who so ably supported him. His memorandum was the most complete and compelling argument against condemnation that could well have been presented. It was a plea at once for

justice and for prudence: for justice to thousands of working men whose sole offense was that of employing the only means open to them to combat evils that were recognized and deplored by liberal minded persons everywhere; and for prudence in avoiding an action that would almost certainly have the most disastrous effects upon the life of the Church in America. "In the minds of all who love humanity and justice," declared Gibbons, "it is clear that it is not only the right of the labouring classes to protect themselves, but that it is the duty of the whole people to aid them in finding a remedy for a danger that threatens civilization and the whole social order." With little change the words might have been taken from any one of a number of statements by Cardinal Manning.

There was of course a good deal of opposition, in which Cardinal Taschereau took a prominent part; and for a time it appeared that a formal condemnation might be issued. But Bishop Keane was soon able to inform Manning that a change had occurred, and that the authorities in Rome were disposed to rely upon the judgment of the American bishops and "to leave well enough alone." Gibbons himself paid warm tribute to the English Cardinal for the help which he had given. "I cannot sufficiently express to you," he said, "how much I have felt strengthened in my position by being able to refer in the document to your utterances on the claims of the working man to our sympathy and support." He expressed his gratification at receiving from Manning a direct endorsement of his own sentiments in this matter, and asked for a copy of the lecture on the Dignity and Rights of Labour, in order to make it better known to his colleagues in America. "We are indebted," he said, "more than you are aware to the influence of your name in discussing these social questions, and in influencing the public mind."

Bishop Keane, one of the most active of Gibbons' aides in Rome during these anxious weeks, wrote in similar vein. "The clear, strong, wise words of Your Eminence's letters," he said, "will be a bulwark to the Church and a rebuke to mischief-makers." The danger of a condemnation with all its unpredictable consequences had passed. "Cardinal Taschereau has gone home," he continued, "with directions from the Holy Office to grant absolution to all the thousands of poor fellows who have been cut off from the sacraments by the condemnation in Canada."

How deeply Manning's work as a social reformer influenced the public mind in his own country it would be impossible to say. But one result is clear. He identified the Church in England with the cause of social justice in a manner that had not been possible since the Reformation; and in that he left an invaluable legacy to his successors. "It is of supreme importance," he said, in a paper that was partially incorporated in Gibbons' memorial on the Knights of Labour, "that the Church should always be found on the side of humanity and of justice towards the multitude who compose the body of the human family." In this new world of industry and democracy, he declared, "the Church has not now

to deal with princes and parliaments, but with the mass of the people. Whether we will it or not, that is our work. We need a new spirit, a new direction of our life and activity.”

His intervention in the controversy over the Knights of Labour was but an incident in a life given in large part to the creation and dissemination of this new spirit. Except in the Catholic press the incident went unnoticed in England. But in Canada, where for obvious reasons the Papal decision was awaited with more interest, it attracted some attention. Cardinal Manning’s statement on this question, said a writer in the *Canadian Freeman* in May, 1887, “has done more than relieve the anxiety of Catholic workmen who were at a loss to reconcile obedience to their religious teachers with their duty to themselves and their families ... By his endorsement of the claims of labour he has set an excellent example to those in authority over other churches.” In that the writer, and not he alone, saw hope for the future. “Now that the Catholic Church is taking the ground that working men have rights as well as duties, there is reason to hope that many abuses will be wiped out.”

One last occasion remained for Manning to demonstrate the two qualities which distinguished him as a social reformer: his deep sympathy with the poor, and his practical ability in dealing with specific situations. His part in the settlement of the great London dock strike of 1889 was a fitting climax to his life’s work in this field. His sympathy was clearly with the strikers, probably the most unfortunate, and up to that time, the most defenseless group of casual workers to be found anywhere in the country. But he held the scales even; and his tribute to the patience and self-restraint of the men was coupled with sincere testimony to the “measured language and calm courtesy of their employers.” His work in negotiating a peaceful settlement won him the acclaim of the nation. The *Times*, never an exceptionally friendly critic of the Cardinal or any of his works declared that by this action he had won “the primacy of all England”; and John Burns, a labour leader who would rise to some prominence in later years, described him as “the best friend the working classes have ever had.” The scenes at his funeral a few years later gave some evidence that many others shared that view.

Speaking to a group of London workers a few years before these events, he had said, “there is no desire nearer my heart than to see your lot, which is hard indeed, lightened and brightened by any effort that can be made.” Not many men in his generation strove more earnestly or more patiently to achieve that result. Not many did more to merit the title of apostle of social justice.