

Rome Stoops to Conquer Chapter III.

Winning The Worker

Continued from [Chapter II. Catholic Action.](#)

"THE Catholic Church, since her emergence as the most powerful society in America, has until recently been singularly inactive in the field of Social Justice. Although a large percentage of her followers belong to the laboring classes, the Church has taken little interest in their problems. Her policy has been to side with the moneyed and privileged class and to frown upon the proletariat. Some of her most conspicuous leaders, such as Cardinal O'Connell, for instance, have been mouthpieces for the principles of the bankers. Very few have consistently advocated industrial and social reform.

It is true that the Church has been shrewd enough to pay lip service to elementary principles of Social Justice. Thus in 1919 the bishops, in a pastoral, declared: "The laborer's right to a decent livelihood is the first moral charge upon industry." Catholic preachers and Catholic journals have from time to time referred to the social program of Leo XIII and his encyclical on Labor. One journal, *America* (a Jesuit publication), boasts that for a quarter of a century it has advocated "collective bargaining, the right of labor to organize, decent working conditions and a living wage for all." But though there be a few pastorals and paragraphs to the credit of the Church's interest in Social Justice, there was never a drive of Catholic Action to curb the capitalist or defend the exploited worker. Such drives are reserved for objectives that the Church considers more important.

American labor, Catholic and non-Catholic, has not been blind to the indifference, and indeed the hypocrisy, of the Catholic Church. Here was a Church, wealthy and powerful, that professed to be "the friend of the poor" and that preached charity and justice, and yet *avored the oppressor and neglected the oppressed*. Workers beheld cardinals, bishops, monsignori gorgeously attired, ceremoniously waited upon, sumptuously banqueted, palatially housed, transported in limousines, sedulously careful not to hurt the feelings of their millionaire patrons and friends, and yet pretending at the same time to have the interests of the poor at heart! Their real interest was to safeguard the *status quo* in which they thrived, to defend the social order that made the rich richer and the poor poorer. No wonder the Church, with her harsh denunciations of Socialism, became an eyesore to the American workers.

Pius XI, referring to the fact that so many Catholics have "deserted the camp of the Church and passed over to the ranks of socialism," alleging, as their reason for doing so, that "the Church and those professing attachment to the Church favor the rich and neglect workingmen," admits that "some" Catholics were unjust to their employees. "Such men," he added, "are the cause that the Church, *without deserving it*, may have the appearance and be accused of taking sides with the wealthy and of being little moved by the needs and sufferings of the disinherited." How many American Catholic workers would

agree with Pius XI that the charge against the Church which he recapitulates is undeserved?

The answer that the Church makes, in this country and elsewhere, to the charge that she has neglected the cause of the poor is to point to her hundreds of hospitals and charitable institutions, and her organizations (such as the St. Vincent de Paul Society) for distributing relief. But this answer is not to the point. In fact, it is no answer at all!

No one in his senses would condemn the Church for her works of mercy. So far as they go they are entirely admirable. But they do not even touch the fringe of the social problem. What comfort is it to the tens of millions of exploited workers to know that there is a Catholic food and clothes dole awaiting tens of thousands who are in uttermost distress? It would, on the other hand, be a comfort to them to know that the Catholic Church was fighting with all her might, tooth and nail, against the conditions that produce hunger and nakedness; that priests and bishops, with their coats off, were united in a mighty drive, at the head of their followers, to insist that justice be done to the workingman. But the Church never espoused the cause of the poor in the only manner that was worth while, either in this or in any other country.

The Catholic Church in America has been as cold and indifferent to and as neglectful of the worker as of the Negro. She is ready to admit, and actually does admit, her shameful neglect of the latter but not of the former. Yet everyone knows that the colored man and the grimy, toil-stained man have been treated by her with like indifference.

If it be true, as the most loyal of American Catholic apologists, Dr. James J. Walsh, writes, that "Cardinals represent the spirit of the Church," we have in Cardinal O'Connell's attitude towards capital and labor an insight into that spirit. The Cardinal, as we shall see later, is the epitome of old-fashioned snobbishness and conservatism; an unfailing friend of the aristocrat, the capitalist and the banker, and an unwavering opponent of the cause of labor. He has preached in his cathedral against the workers and lauded the rich. He had the effrontery, in 1930, to preach in the presence of Mr. Green and other officials of the A. F. of L. of the "interest of the Church in labor." The message he gave to the A. F. of L. was to surrender, or as he put it, to "co-operate with Capital."

Cardinal O'Connell, as dean and ranking leader of the hierarchy, for twenty years has guided the policy of the Catholic Church here. That policy has been to conciliate the rich and to milk the poor. The Church, which insists on "Sharing the wealth" of all her children, looks askance at workers who teach socialistic doctrines of distribution of unearned riches.

Writes a Catholic who professes his readiness to die for the Church or the Pope?: "We find no solid union of Catholics fighting against the present immoral capitalistic system. We find no solidarity of the faithful in an attempt to bring to this earth the City of God. No, we find only harmless 'clean-movie' drives! What kind of [Catholic] action is it that allows textile mill operatives to be treated like slaves? What kind of Catholicism

is it that softly closes its eyes at the diurnal exploitation of the proletariat on the part of the capitalist overlords? You know what kind of Catholicism it is. It is that of which the Marxist can well say, 'religion is the dope of the people.' "

The writer, a student of Columbia University, quotes effectively in his letter from great Catholic theologians who taught that poverty was a source of temptation and an evil state from which one should try to escape. He contrasts this teaching with that of Cardinal O'Connell and with the practice of the Church in America, and winds up: "Do not chide Father Coughlin. Raise up twenty Coughlins. Instead of one fighting priest let us have twenty fighting bishops. That is what Catholicism means today!" It would be easy to quote from scores of Catholic correspondents remarks similar to those of the Columbia student. It is evident that there is widespread shame among thoughtful Catholics over the conduct of the Church in regard to labor.

But now a change or what looks like a change has come about suddenly. What is its meaning? Whence comes the reversal of the time-honored policy of avoiding any action that capital would find disagreeable? Whence this seething newborn zeal for Social Justice? Bishops, Jesuits, Calvert Associates and Knights of Columbus are tumbling over one another in a mad rush to grasp the hand of the worker and slap him on the back! Today nothing is too good for labor; nothing too bad to be said about capitalists!

The plain fact is that the American bishops have taken fright. They found that they had lost influence with their own Catholic workers and were hated and despised by non-Catholic workers. It became evident that they could never hope to pursue successfully their great schemes unless the workers were conciliated and persuaded to envisage the Church with a more friendly eye. The situation had become very desperate and only desperate remedies were worth trying. The Church commenced her great campaign on the industrial front forthwith, and proclaimed a "new deal" for Labor. She is determined to make a bid at being "the worker's Church."

The papal encyclical "Quadragesimo Anno" made a timely appearance. It was completed in May, 1931, and placed in the hands of the American bishops as an instrument of propaganda. It is an astute document, capable of being interpreted in a liberal sense; capable also of being employed as a check to radicalism. It enfolds splendid shibboleths and a few fiery phrases to arouse labor to a sense of the "progressiveness" of Rome. On the other hand, it is drawn up with an eye to conserving all the important interests of capital. It is both liberal and conservative; profound and platitudinous; practical and too general for application. It is called, for the purposes of Catholic propaganda, "a charter of freedom for the worker," but in reality it is a sheet anchor for the old social order of capitalism and competition.

The encyclical offered a glorious opportunity for priests with the gift of eloquence, or the itch to write, to win fame and publicity. Bishops and superiors let them go ahead, and "red" sermons were delivered under the high vaults of Catholic cathedrals. With obvious guilelessness the learned Jesuit Father L. K. Patterson wrote in *America*: "Now is the time for Catholic priests and scholars to speak out fearlessly in defense of Social Justice. A

mere banal enunciation of general principles is not sufficient; we must be ruthless in applying 'Quadragesimo Anno' to concrete conditions. Little or nothing in the New Deal seems radical in the light of that Encyclical. Indeed, one wonders if it goes far enough... . Educated Catholics, where do you stand? We can break the grip of privilege; and the sway of selfish groups; unhorse the munition makers; if we but really desire to do so. Thus we will forestall the 'hatchet-man'!"

The "new deal" that the Catholic Church is offering to the American worker is propagandized by *The Catholic Worker* of New York. This clever and piously-bright paper plays up the "advanced" doctrines and dicta of the clergy. It gives Father Haas, for example, two columns for his attack on the manner in which Section 7-A has been administered, and another column for his plea for a \$2,500 a year "family wage" for workers. "All American workers must be assured of a yearly income that will maintain them at a decent standard of living and this amount should be set at not less than \$2,500 (a livable family income in 1946)."

The most revealing contribution (in the March issue) is one from a Jesuit, Father Winter, who is busy of late organizing unemployed in Denver. He started a "Catholic Worker's Protective Alliance" which he says "does the same work for the jobless as the Communists do, sending committees to the relief stations, insisting on fair play, visiting families who appeal to us." Father Winter has so closely copied the kindness and charity of the Communists that he proudly boasts: "They said Father Winter is a Communist but does not know it!" He goes on to report that many men have come back to the Church because "at last the Church is doing something for the unemployed." Then follows the revealing sentence which tells of some of his men who were formerly Communists: "*They give their coal, their food, their days and nights to the work, just as they did when they were with the Communists.*"

Whether the American workers will be won over by the pious camaraderie of Dorothy Day of *The Catholic Worker*, the roseate promises of Father Haas, the pseudo-Communist charities of Father Winter, and the "red paragraphs" of the Pope's encyclical remains to be seen. But it is likely that the Church will have to devise some more original and some more substantial bait for them before they troop in millions to the shelter of her fold.

A contributor to the *American Mercury* calls the Catholic campaign to win the workers a "counter-attack." "In the past few years, with Father Coughlin in the van, numerous Catholic leaders have been not at all backward in denouncing the present social order. They employ the Pope's words, in his famous labor encyclical, "the tyrannical despotism" of capitalism. Some of the statements of these priests and lay spokesmen sound more like Union Square diatribes than utterances of the most conservative religionists. To say the least, they have done their part well in the counter-attack of the Church."

We turn now to the encyclical itself, "Quadragesimo Anno," the basis of Catholic labor doctrine; the instrument that Pius XI put into the hands of the American Church for the conquest of the workers.

In effect it is both a treatise on industrialism and social ethics, and a political document. In its latter aspect, which we shall deal with in a subsequent chapter, it is Catholic Fascism; in its former aspect it is age-old Thomism (the philosophical and theological school of Thomas Aquinas), changeless, conservative and unimaginative.

We notice that Pius XI, early in his letter, lays claim to divine authority to teach the true eternal doctrine of industrial ethics. "We lay down the principle, long since clearly established by Leo XIII, that it is Our right and Our duty to deal authoritatively with social and economic problems." We propose to omit from this brief analysis the many touching and edifying aphorisms on charity and morals, and the many laudatory references to Leo XIII and Pius X. "Economic life must be inspired by Christian principles" summarizes the mystical elements of the encyclical.

Pius XI does not lighten the burden of religious duty that his predecessors placed on the backs of Catholic workers. For instance, he insists that the labor unions they join should be Catholic, or at very least "Christian." Never may Catholic workers join "un-Christian" (Socialist) unions. If there be none but "neutral" unions, the workers must seek the permission of their bishops before joining. Pius writes: "These {neutral unions} should always respect justice and equity and leave their Catholic members full freedom to follow the dictates of their conscience and obey the precepts of the Church. It belongs to the Bishops to permit Catholic workingmen to join these Unions, where they judge that circumstances render it necessary, and there appears no danger for religion, observing however the rules and precautions recommended by Our Predecessor of saintly memory, Pius X."

Practically speaking, this paragraph (with the final ominous insistence on obedience to the reactionary Pius X's rules and precautions) excludes Catholic workers from all American labor unions. There is not one that meets all the requirements of Pius X and Pius XI.

Curiously enough, although Pius XI desiderates (wishes to see) "Associations of Employers," he lays down no rules or precautions whereby the Catholic industrial magnate should go on his knees to his bishop before joining his "Association." There is one law for the poor Catholic worker and another for the Catholic millionaire!

In the papal estimation, "Associations of Employers" are presumed to have "respect for justice and equity" while "Labor Unions" are presumed to have no such virtue.

"Quadragesimo Anno" contains, as we have stated, some fine outbursts of liberal sentiment. Pius XI waves the red flag in half a dozen paragraphs. With holy wrath he denounces certain financial monsters. He points a warning finger at some abuses of government. How he undoes all the good effect of this bravery we shall see later.

Here then is Pius XI, the friend of the worker. "The immense number of propertyless wage-earners on the one hand, and the superabundant riches of the fortunate few on the other is an unanswerable argument that earthly goods

so abundantly produced in this age of industrialism are far from rightly distributed and equitably shared among various classes of men."

Again: "It is patent that in our days not only is wealth accumulated but immense power and despotic economic domination is concentrated in the hands of a few. . . . This power becomes particularly irresistible when exercised by those who, because they hold and control money, are able to govern credit.. This accumulation of power, the characteristic note of the modern economic order, is a natural result of limitless free competition which permits the survival of those only who are the strongest, which often means those who fight most relentlessly, who pay least heed to the dictates of conscience the whole economic life has become hard, cruel, and relentless in a ghastly measure the intermingling and scandalous confusion of duties and offices of civil authority and of economics has produced crying evils and has gone so far as to degrade the majesty of the State."

Again: "Certain forms of property must be reserved to the State since they carry with them an opportunity of domination too great to be left to private individuals without injury to the country at large."

Again: "Every effort must be made that at least in future a just share only of the fruits of production be permitted to accumulate in the hands of the wealthy and that an ample sufficiency be supplied to the workingmen."

Added to these resounding trumpet calls, we have many wise if unoriginal platitudes, for instance: "It would be well if various nations in common counsel and endeavor strove to promote a healthy economic cooperation by prudent pacts and institutions, since in economic matters they are largely dependent one upon the other, and need one another's help."

From the foregoing one might expect that His Holiness would proceed to declare that the capitalistic system was in general unjust; that the wage-contract in common use was neither just nor valid inasmuch as one party to the contract has to sign under moral duress; that "the superabundant riches of the fortunate few" should be forfeited and shared; that free competition should be ruthlessly restricted. But, to the reader's astonishment and disappointment, Pius XI goes on to justify the actual status quo. On every point indicated he retreats hastily from the advanced posts he seemed to have occupied, and takes shelter in downright reaction.

Here then is Pius XI, the upholder of the capitalist and the enemy of labor. "The [capitalistic] system is not to be condemned. And surely it is not vicious of its very nature." Continuing, in an involved, casuistic sentence, he explains that "it violates right order" when it takes every advantage to itself and completely disregards social justice, the common good and the human dignity of the worker. Pius XI does not assert that this actually happens, nor does he admit that anything short of these enormities would be "a violation of right order."

As regards "free competition" he declares that "within certain limits it is just and productive of good results." He does not say what the "limits" are; only it should not be "the ruling principle" of economic life.

Next as regards the vital matter of the wage-contract: "Those who hold that the wage-contract is essentially unjust and that in its place must be introduced the contract of partnership are certainly in error."

Again: "Entirely false is the principle widely propagated today that the worth of labor and therefore the equitable return to be made for it, should equal the worth of its net result. Thus the right to the full product of his toil is claimed for the wage-earner. How erroneous this is appears from what we have written above concerning capital and labor."

This condemnation is no doubt logical in the light of Thomistic principles of "ownership," but it is harsh in the light of modern conditions and modern conceptions.

Let us proceed further. When Pius XI declares that "the wage paid to a workingman must be sufficient for the support of himself and his family," he seems to be fair, if not generous, to the worker. But he follows up this declaration with the qualification: "It is right indeed that the rest of the family contribute according to their power toward the common maintenance." He seems to imply that the employer is not bound to pay a full family wage to the father in the case where some of the children, or perhaps the wife, is earning.

Pius XI takes an unequivocal stand against "excessive" wages, if indeed such are ever paid. He says: "All are aware that a scale of wages too low no less than too high causes unemployment. . . . To lower or raise wages unduly with a view to private profit and with no consideration for the common good, is contrary to social justice."

Pius XI is adamant as regards the rights of property-owners. "It belongs to commutative justice to respect the possessions of others." He teaches also that "the misuse or non-use of ownership does not destroy the right itself" . . . "it is unlawful for the State to exhaust the means of individuals by crushing taxes and tributes" . . . "man's natural right of possessing and transmitting property by inheritance cannot be taken away by the State from man."

Pius admits that the State may ("provided the natural and divine law be observed") specify more accurately what is licit and what is illicit for property-owners "*in the use of their possessions*," but he hastens to add that "it is plain that the State may not discharge this duty in an arbitrary way." The encyclical has been written into the *Congressional Record* at the instance of Huey Long, whose "Share the Wealth" program it very pointedly blasts!

All this teaching implies that the "fortunate few" may continue to hold their "superabundant riches" with the Pope's blessing subject only to the obligations of charity and of "certain other virtues." In strict justice they are not bound either to use their wealth well or to make any use of it at all. With regard to superfluous income, if, instead of devoting it to the general good, the owner invests it "in searching favorable opportunities for employment, provided the labor employed produces results that are really useful," he meets all the 'demands of virtue. The State may of course tax

property but not unduly, nor may the State interfere in an “arbitrary way” in directing how superfluous income or property be employed.

Such is a brief analysis of what has so falsely been called a “charter of freedom” for the worker and “the death-knell of the capitalist.” It is precisely the kind of worker’s charter that one might expect to emanate from the mind of a priestly capitalist and an infallible autocrat.

“Quadragesimo Anno” has, of course, been lauded to the skies by others than Catholics. There are few members of President Roosevelt’s Cabinet who have not sung its praises. In a recent interview* Senator Gerald P. Nye called it “the most magnificent contribution to social and economic reconstruction which it had been my privilege to study.” General Hugh S. Johnson referred to it as a document “unsurpassed by the mind of man.”

None the less, it seems to the present writer that “Quadragesimo Anno” teaches “*Social Order*” rather than “*Social Justice*.” No intelligent worker, who studied its contents, would be content to abide by its doctrines or would see in them any broadening of his hopes.

Nevertheless, on account of its “purple patches,” coming as it does from a Pope of Rome, it makes an excellent basis for Catholic propaganda. One can figure a Catholic spellbinder addressing a mob of unemployed: “Hear what the Pope says –and you know how careful Popes are not to overstate a case! ‘The whole economic life has become hard, cruel, and relentless in a ghastly degree’! What do you think of that? Hear him again! ‘Immense power and despotic economic domination is concentrated in the hands of a few’–he says ‘despotic domination’ and he means it! He says, ‘In future a just share only of the fruits of production will be permitted to accumulate in the hands of the wealthy and an ample sufficiency must be supplied to the workingmen!?’ What about that? What’s wrong with the Pope or the Catholic Church?”

Continued in [Chapter IV. Public Safety](#)

All chapters of Rome Stoops to Conquer, by E. Boyd Barrett

- [Chapter I. Twilight Revolt](#)
- [Chapter II. Catholic Action](#)
- [Chapter III. Winning The Worker](#)
- [Rome Stoops to Conquer Chapter IV. Public Safety](#)