

Jocist Movement and CFM

See--Judge--Act--How young Christian Workers Renewed the Church. This article from "Salt of the Earth" magazine by Meinrad Scherer-Edmunds explains the work of Joseph Cardijn and origins of the Jocist movement which developed into CFM in the United States.

See -- Judge -- Act: How Young Christian Workers Renewed the Church

by Meirad Scherer-Edmunds, Salt of the Earth

The night before 13-year-old Joseph Cardijn was to leave for his first day of work in the factory, he mustered the courage to ask his father a question he'd been mulling over for a long time: "Papa, can I carry on with my studies?"

That request came as something of a shock to Cardijn's parents, who had counted on him, the oldest son, to finally help support the struggling family. But Cardijn continued, "I feel that God is calling me, I want to become a priest."

His parents, deeply religious, agreed to make further sacrifices to help their son pursue his call. So while his peers in the small Belgian town of Hal went off to work in the area's factories, Cardijn continued his schooling and in the following year, 1896, entered the minor seminary at nearby Malines.

When the boarding-school student came back home for the holidays he found his friends' attitudes toward him greatly changed. "I could see then how my old playmates -- better chaps than I, often enough -- had given up even going to church after a few months at work. Just because I was studying to be a priest, they looked upon me as an enemy. The abyss between us had been dug.

From that moment onward I was . . . haunted for life by the call: to save the working class. I could see that endless procession of young people, 13 or 14 years old, forced to leave school in order to work in corrupt conditions The truth was that entirely new problems were raised by these young people, and there was no one to help them find the right answer."

It became Cardijn's mission in life to help young workers find the answers to their new problems and, in the process, to try to bridge that "abyss," which had opened up between the working class and the church.

The Young Christian Workers movement, which Cardijn founded, became the most influential Catholic Action movement of the first half of this century, and the see-judge-act method Cardijn developed has become the most popular model for Catholic social action from Europe to Latin America and from South Africa to the Philippines and the United States.

During his first parish assignment, Cardijn made it part of his routine to accompany workers on their way to the factory. People were quite surprised when this man in the cassock didn't ask them the usual questions about whether they went to Mass every Sunday or if their children were coming to catechism class. Cardijn asked about working conditions in their factories, how much they earned, whether women worked there, and how many children they had. His organizing activities among young workers started with the parish's Girls' Club -- a small, conventional group, which he quickly transformed into the Women's Christian Workers' League with 1,000 members, grouped according to their jobs in a variety of associations.

During World War I, Cardijn was appointed chaplain of the Christian Trade Unions and oversaw the Malines archdiocese's social work. He was twice arrested by the German occupation force. During the second imprisonment, Cardijn smuggled out instructions for the workers' study circles he had initiated and his ideas about "the right methods of the apostolate as adapted to save the working class. "It was from these notes that Cardijn later wrote the Manual of the Young Christian Workers movement.

After World War I, Cardijn continued his work among young workers with a new organization he called Trade Union Youth. It soon expanded into cities throughout Belgium and was renamed Young Christian Workers (YCW). The 2 movement came also to be known as Jocism, after its French name Jeunesse Ouvriere Chrétienne (JOC).

What struck a chord with so many young workers was the way Cardijn's approach connected everyday life with religion. Clearly the majority of Christians in Europe had bought into what Cardijn called "religious liberalism" and some theologians call "bourgeois religion."

As Cardijn explained it, "For an immense number of Christians, religion is only a private affair, something apart from their daily work." He called this view "unconscious, anonymous apostasy.

"Religious liberalism. . . said: The church's business is within the churches and the sacristies. Its business has nothing to do with wages and working conditions The church and religion are out of all this. And Catholics, Catholic employers, learned Catholics let themselves be influenced by the liberalism of the times. Deceived by [it], they allowed the wool to be pulled over their eyes and abandoned the working class."

Against that background, Cardijn postulated religion as "a whole life which, like the host, should be consecrated to God. . . .[Religion] should be the spirit, the motivator, the transformer, and the supernaturalizer" of daily work. He saw it as the goal of his movement to "Christianize the entire secular life in its individual as well as its social dimensions."

In the Jocist groups, young workers learned to see the facts of their everyday lives, to judge them in the light of the gospel and Catholic social teaching, and to act on their

new insights and change and transform their immediate "milieu" as well as the larger society.

Although Cardijn and other chaplains played an important role in the Jocist movement, it broke new ground in firmly establishing itself as an autonomous lay movement by young workers, among young workers, and for young workers. In this "like-to-like apostolate," the YCW became the model for the many other "Specialized Catholic Action" lay organizations that sprung up around the world.

As the Jocist movement grew, so did the fear of conservative Belgian Catholics. They feared the YCW, biographer Michael de la Bedoyere writes, as "nothing but a highly dangerous Catholic socialism, doing, however good its intentions, the devil's work in disturbing the so conveniently established social and class order." They also accused Cardijn's "specialized" approach to the workers' apostolate of undermining the unity of Catholic Action.

As complaint after complaint came pouring into the archdiocesan chancery, Malines' Cardinal Desire Mercier felt compelled to act. In 1924 he issued an official condemnation of the Jocist movement.

Cardijn asked permission to go to Rome in the following spring and appeal the decision directly to Pope Pius XI.

It was the Lenten season of a Holy Year, and people in Rome told Cardijn it would be impossible to get a private audience with the pope. But somehow he managed to finagle his way into the pontiff's study.

"What do you want?' [the pope] asked, wondering how this man had managed to evade those responsible for the privacy of the Holy Father," recounts de la Bedoyere.

"Face to face with the pope, Cardijn was terrified. But . . . he managed to blurt out, 'Most Holy Father, I want to kill myself in order to save the working masses.'"

Surprisingly, the pope heard Cardijn out, and not only did he lift the ban, but he enthusiastically endorsed the movement.

"At last!" Pius XI is reported to have said. "Here's someone who talks to me of the masses, of saving the masses. Everyone else talks to me of the elite. What is needed is an elite in the masses, a leaven in the paste Not only do we bless your movement, we want it. We make it ours."

Cardijn and Pius XI formed a lifelong friendship, and Cardijn became a trusted advisor to the pope, helping to draft later papal statements on the lay apostolate.

This papal backing was followed by the formal approval by the Belgian hierarchy and

the first national YCW congress.

The movement rapidly grew in Belgium and, beginning with a French initiative in 1927, soon expanded internationally. The first International YCW Congress in 1935 was attended by 100,000 participants from 14 different countries.

In the U.S., YCW groups started in 1938, introduced by the Australian writer Paul McGuire and a number of social-action-oriented priests, most notably Donald Kanaly, Reynold Hillenbrand, Jack Egan, Louis Putz, and Henri Roy.

In 1946, Cardijn made his first trip to the Americas. Because of the important role of the United States in the world economy, Cardijn very much wanted to encourage the U.S. YCW. "We cannot be strong in our international movement without America," he repeatedly said.

But the U.S. YCW never fulfilled Cardijn's high expectations for it. It expanded during the 1950s and, with a membership of over 3,000, reached its peak at the end of that decade. Although it never attracted the kind of numbers Jocists in other countries did, it was nonetheless influential -- together with the other Catholic Action movements, the Young Christian Students and the Christian Family Movement -- in paving the way for a greater role of the laity in the U.S. Catholic Church.

A major obstacle to the success of the American YCW was its European worker-movement terminology. During the McCarthy era many conservative U.S. Catholics were suspicious of this European import.

"Jocists belonged to 'cells' organized under a 'central committee' and worked to influence their 'milieu,'" remembers Mary O'Neil Good, a former YCW leader. "When I left home in 1959 to work full-time for the YCW national office in Chicago, my mother, afraid our Brooklyn neighbors would think I had joined a Communist organization, told people I was working for the YMCA."

When the membership in the U.S. Jocist movement began to decline in the early 1960s, the national YCW council even voted to change the organization's name to Young Christian Movement because they believed workers in the U.S. did not feel comfortable with the term workers. But that didn't halt the decline, and the U.S. YCW ran out of steam by 1970.

"Middle-class affluence, increased social and occupational mobility among young people, the lack of positive support from the hierarchy, the changes in societal values, the youth rebellion against authority -- all these contributed to the demise," writes another former YCW leader, Mary Irene Zotti, in *A Time of Awakening*.

Outside the U.S., the YCW grew steadily during Cardijn's lifetime. His ideas were incorporated into social encyclicals such as Pius XI's *Quadragesimo anno* and John

XXIII's Mater et magistra. During Vatican II, Cardijn was named a cardinal and helped shape the documents on the church in the world and the role of the laity.

When Cardijn died in 1967, the YCW had 4 million members in 80 countries.

Although Vatican II strengthened the role of the laity in the church, it also had a side effect. "The pastoral concern of the church," notes Zotti, "seemed to turn in on itself . . . The outward-looking apostolic movements of the church were supplanted by intrachurch ministries which opened to the laity after the Vatican Council. The connection between the church and the everyday world was neglected."

Since the death of its charismatic founder, the international YCW has also seen a decline in membership. A dispute in the 1980s over its proper Catholic identity caused a split into two organizations. Despite these conflicts, the YCW has remained a vibrant force in many countries and continues to pique the conscience of the Catholic Church . "Cardijn believed in the important role of the laity," Brazilian archbishop Dom Helder Camara once noted. "He recognized its worth at a time when hardly anyone in the church did. The YCW has been at the root of the kind of lay apostolate that led . . . to the conscious involvement of laypeople in the matters of the world. He trained us to see situations objectively, to judge them in the light of the gospel, and to act together accordingly."

Asked what Cardijn would tell us today, Camara answered: "Forward!"

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