Paul Misner

Catholic Labor Movements in Europe: Social Thought and Action, 1914–1965.

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Paul Misner, professor emeritus of theology at Marquette University, has published a long-awaited sequel to his respected analysis of the Catholic social movement in nineteenth-century Europe, *Social Catholicism in Europe: From the Onset of Industrialization to the First World War* (New York: Crossroad, 1991). He argues that most Catholic social activists rejected pluralism until the 1950s, as they sought to “re-Christianize” European society under Catholic leadership. They found in practice, however, that they could only mobilize Catholic workers by adopting programs and techniques of organization that prepared them for “an acceptance, indeed an embrace, of pluralism in society, democracy in government, and a socially balanced capitalism in economic life” after the Second World War. Catholic labor organizations therefore “contributed more than is generally realized to the model of social partnership between management and labor in Western European countries after World War II” (1–2). To develop this argument Misner distills the most valuable published documentary sources and the best recent scholarship in English, French, Italian, Dutch, and German; his impressive language skills make him a valuable guide.

Christian labor activists faced some basic problems in every European country. To compete with socialist trade unions, they were compelled to organize effective strikes and advocate a program of social legislation similar to that of the socialist parties. These stands often provoked criticism by the church hierarchy, however; even the papal encyclicals most sympathetic to Catholic workers, *Rerum novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo anno* (1931), expressed grave concern about strike activity as a disruption of social order. In most countries Catholic labor activists therefore adopted a two-pronged scheme of organization, with “Christian” trade unions open to non-Catholics and independent of the episcopate, alongside “Catholic” workers’ clubs for education and religious devotion, in which the clergy played a leading role. This two-pronged approach was pioneered in the Rhineland in the 1890s because German Catholics lived in a country with a Protestant majority and could only hope to establish effective trade unions on an “inter-confessional” basis. The approach proved most effective, however, in Belgium and the Netherlands; some of Misner’s most informative sections involve the vibrant experiments in the Low Countries for promoting cooperation among the Christian trade unions, church-affiliated organizations, and government agencies influenced by Catholic politicians (see Chapters Five and Twelve). In France, the Christian trade unions remained very small until the late 1930s and faced hostility from the mostly conservative

clergy. No network of Catholic workers' clubs developed in France, and the Christian trade unions relied on a small group of sympathetic Jesuits in the *Action populaire* to shield them from episcopal criticism. The French Christian unions also gained vigorous support from the bishop of Lille, Achille Liénart, in a bitter dispute with textile industrialists, and the combined influence of the Jesuits and the bishop yielded a vigorous public declaration by the Vatican in 1929 endorsing strike action by Catholic workers in alliance with socialist and even Communist trade unionists (107–17).

Misner offers a fascinating account of the novel techniques developed in the mid-1920s by a Belgian priest from a working-class background, Joseph Cardijn, to organize "Christian Working Youth" in the JOC (*Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne*), a movement that spread quickly to France and later to Germany and many other countries. Cardijn insisted that young workers should be recruited and organized primarily by other young workers. In France, the JOC encountered fierce opposition by the mainstream Catholic youth league, which claimed the right to organize youth from all social classes under clerical leadership. Jesuit advisers figured prominently on both sides of this debate, but their superiors intervened to remove both combatants from the arena and advised a settlement favorable to the JOC (121–29, 136–40). Cardijn somehow gained a lengthy private audience with Pope Pius XI in 1925, who embraced his model with great enthusiasm and invited him for follow-up reports each year thereafter. This was a unique demonstration of papal favor for a controversial Catholic social initiative (131).

Pius XI poses a conundrum for Misner because of his ambivalent response to the rise of Italian Fascism. Mussolini did not consolidate Fascist power in Italy until 1926, but Pius XI responded almost immediately to his appointment as prime minister in October 1922 with stern demands that all Italian Catholics abandon any "political activism" and participate instead in a movement of Catholic Action under strict episcopal supervision, in which Catholics would never be organized along vocational lines but only according to the four "natural estates" of boys, men, girls, and women. Activists in the Italian Popularist Party (the forerunner of post-1945 Christian Democracy) and Christian trade unions felt betrayed, and Catholics in democratic countries did not know whether Pius only responded defensively to the Fascist onslaught or sought to impose this model on them as well. Misner inclines toward the latter view, judging that Pius XI regarded the "liberal, secular state" as moribund and sought to exploit Mussolini's violent suppression of socialism, freemasonry, and anticlericalism to "re-Christianize" European society. Misner offers an illuminating discussion of the origins and text of the encyclical *Quadragesimo anno* but concludes that its noble core, the elucidation of the principles of

“solidarity” and “subsidiarity” worked out by the German Jesuits Gustav Gundlach and Oswald von Nell-Breuning, was misunderstood by a great many Catholics at the time because of signs that the Vatican sympathized with the dictatorships of Italy, Portugal, Austria, and Franco’s Spain (194–99, 212–19).

Only two criticisms can be leveled at this highly illuminating book. First, Misner only discusses anti-Semitism in one passage (204–6), emphasizing its crucial influence on the Austrian Christian trade unions in the 1920s. Many Catholic social thinkers and workers outside Austria succumbed to the temptation of blaming complex social and economic problems on the Jews. In both German- and French-speaking Europe, there appears to have been an important north-south divide in this regard (with north European Catholics more resistant to anti-Semitism), but Misner neglects this issue. A second problem is that Misner only begins on p. 269 of a 296-page work to discuss the emergence of vibrant democracies in Western Europe after the Second World War. Misner devotes only a paragraph or two each to such complex topics as the birth of the European “common market” in the 1950s, new legislation to promote worker participation in management, and new approaches to welfare programs. He also emphasizes that liberal economists influenced by Anglo-American colleagues rather than Catholic social theory exerted dominant influence on the economic reconstruction of Western Europe (269–70). In 1950, Pius XII repudiated the boldest demand by West German Catholics for stronger worker participation in management, and the Jesuits Nell-Breuning and Gundlach adopted diametrically opposed positions in this debate for many years thereafter (277–78). Misner ends this book with insightful analysis of the contributions by important Catholic social activists studied earlier to the most innovative resolutions of the Second Vatican Council (285–92). A more detailed discussion of the 1950s would be necessary to develop the theme announced at the outset that Catholics “contributed more than is generally realized to the model of social partnership between management and labor” that emerged in Western Europe after 1945 (2). The reader is left with an illuminating and well researched analysis of the changing strategies of the Catholic Church to deal with an increasingly secular world, strategies based on a complex interaction between Catholic social theory and the experience of organizations seeking to mobilize Catholic workers.

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