Paul Misner

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


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