

A BOY FROM FLANDERS



THE LIFE of JOSEPH CARDIJN

The contents of this booklet first appeared as an issue of *Anthonian* published in the United States. In looking for a short history of the life of Joseph Cardijn we felt we could do no better than to reproduce this well documented and researched version.

We are most grateful to the publishers, St Anthony's Guild and to Fr Salvator Fink OFM for their willingness for us to do this.

COVER: *Canon Joseph Cardijn as a sixteen-year old seminarian. A man of his time and an apostle of youth, he died a cardinal in 1967.*

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TROUBLED TIMES

"Cardijn! – Cardijn! – Cardijn!" The cry first sprang from a small group in the large crowd gathered that memorable Sunday in 1935 in Heysel Stadium, Brussels. One by one, sections of the crowd picked up the cry, and now the name rose in a mighty rhythmic chant from 100,000 throats. The priest who was the object of the throng's attention and affection stood on a speaker's platform in the stadium's centre. He lifted his hands to plead for silence. Stomping and cheering, clapping and whistling, the crowd, mostly youngsters in their teens and early twenties, were bursting with a sense of joy and well-being. It was a happy gathering and a proud one. The girls were dressed in simple print dresses and the boys in cheap, neat suits.

They had spent the morning at Mass and, after a parade to Heysel Stadium, had gathered to hear the man who made all the difference in their lives.

Gradually the crowd quieted, and the priest began to speak, at first slowly and gently. Before him lay a carefully prepared manuscript. He never looked at it. He was in deep and complete communication with the thousands of youngsters surrounding him. He spoke to them of their dignity and how their talents and energy, hopes and dreams benefited their world. Theirs was the world of the factory and workbench, of the mill, and the shop. Like all workers in the 1930s, these young people

were struggling to survive the terrible Depression lashing the world. The priest continued to speak and they listened, giving him their minds and hearts. It was an age when persuasive orators like Roosevelt and Churchill, and demagogues like Hitler and Mussolini, moved millions of hearts through the spoken word.

This man spoke, not of war or hatred or fear. With words of hope and love and faith, he challenged his audience to lead Christian lives and to bring Christ to their world. They listened carefully. He was founding father and continuing source of inspiration for the worldwide organisation called the Young Christian Workers (YCW), to which the youngsters belonged. This day, delegates from many parts of the globe had gathered in Brussels to observe the YCW's tenth anniversary with Cardijn. * The celebration was a high point in the priest's colourful career.

Now concluding his talk, Father Cardijn urged the vast assembly "to be the hope of our times." "I bless you," he exclaimed. "I send you back to your homes, your places of work, your parts of the world, with one watchword: Conquest!" This man had nothing less in mind than to conquer the world for Christ. Who was he? Where did he get power to sway young people's hearts? What role did he have in the Church? To understand

*Pronounced *car-dine'*



An eager face and crew cut readily identify young Joseph (third from left, middle row) among his Halle school-mates. A typical boy, he loved rough and tumble as much as his books.

his story and appreciate his magnificent contribution to the modern Church, we must journey back to the 1880s in Halle, a quiet Belgian market town, and to a little boy lying awake in his bed at pre-dawn.

A WINDOW ON THE WORLD

"Come, Joseph, we must deliver this coal before dark!" So Henry Cardijn would urge his ten-year-old son. Henry had always dreamed of having his own business. A few years after Joseph's birth in Brussels (1882), Henry and his wife, Louise, came to Halle and invested their tiny savings in a small and not very lucrative coal business. The hours were long, the work was hard. Now, as this day was ending, father and son prepared for one last delivery. The

contrast between the two was marked. Henry was square and stolid and quiet. His son Joseph was small, alert and lively. The coal dust festooning the boy's clothes and blackening his face only intensified his intelligent, snapping dark eyes and the good humour of his puckish grin. The hard work Joseph shared with his father neither dulled his mind nor crushed his naturally buoyant spirits.

A magnificent medieval town hall bordered one side of Halle's town square, and an ancient cathedral shrine to Our Lady, the other. Along the cobblestone square, Halle's craftsmen plied their trades. Cobblers, tailors, bakers and leather workers turned out magnificent products to sell to farmers who came to town for market. The effervescent Joseph loved to chat with the artisans. Their skills fascinated him. Frequently these men would let Joseph work with their tools. One set of instruments,

however, the boy never tried. These belonged to the square's dentist who practiced upon Halle's stolid and stalwart farmers. To ease their pain, these brave patients of the pre-anaesthetic generation could only grunt and writhe in the dentist's upright wooden chair. Sometimes they would signal special agony by pounding their wooden shoes on the square's cobblestones. Joseph suffered through every extraction and drilling he witnessed.

The ever curious boy, a voracious reader, loved school. He particularly enjoyed adventure stories and listed Jules Verne among his favourite authors. But the stories he loved most of all were the stories his mother told him.

THE KITCHEN STOVE

At night, when supper dishes were put away and the homework done, Louise Cardijn would gather her own and many of her neighbour's little children, now in nightclothes, about the large iron kitchen stove. Papa Cardijn would stretch himself on a sofa and pretend sleep. Then Louise would spin her yarns. She told the eager little ones of Little Red Riding Hood, Tom Thumb and Bluebeard. She recited Bible stories. Never did Joseph in all his life hear anyone who could lend colour, depth and meaning to a story as Louise did. The sheer power and beauty of her recital so moved the quiet Papa Cardijn that Joseph often saw him lift a finger to remove a silent tear from his supposedly sleeping eye.

A woman of deep faith, Louise



Louise Cardijn

Cardijn's belief in God was at the root of everything she did within and outside her home. If, in later life, Joseph Cardijn dedicated himself to restoring religion to the workingman's everyday life, it was because his mother had lived that way.

Beggars seeking alms from pilgrims at the shrine of the Blessed Virgin frequented Halle's town square during Cardijn's childhood. Leaving their home, Louise often gave Joseph a bit of money. "Joseph," she said, "you will meet a beggar. You may either keep this money to purchase ice cream or cake or candy for yourself, or give it to a beggar. The choice is yours." Unfailingly, little Joseph gave the money away. Louise would then say: "Joseph, that's good. Do that all your life." For all his mischievousness and exuberance, Joseph was sensitive to every type of human suffering he encountered. There was one group, however, whose trials affected him so deeply that they shaped the course of his whole life.



*For the children of the poor there was no
joy – only hard work*



BROKEN SLEEP

He heard these men and women before he saw them. Their sounds penetrated his sleep and sank into his brain, waking him at four or five in the morning. The little boy would then peer into the dawn's grey light and see them, like so many dark shadows. They were Halle's factory workers. The shuffling of their wooden shoes against the cobblestone streets was a sound that would haunt Joseph to his grave. The sight of workers dragging their seven-to-eight-year-old sons and daughters into the factories, saddened the young man. "Where are the little ones going?" Joseph asked his father and mother. "Places they do not belong," his father replied. "They should not be permitted to work in the factories." Belgian labourers worked a twelve to fourteen-hour day and earned pennies. Farm animals had a day of rest, but not the workers or their children.

To this day, former factory hands remember their working days with horror. One lady, old and grey now, recalls that when she was a tiny eight-year-old, her foreman stood her on a box and tied her to her threading machine so she could reach her work and not wander away from it. In the mines, employers often locked children into iron braces at their work place. If the little ones fell asleep on the job, as they sometimes did, they would not fall and suffer severe injury.

Neither politicians nor professors nor, sad to say, Church authorities, helped the workers. From time to time a courageous priest would protest and suffer punishment for his

pains. Wealthier classes scorned the workers for their drunkenness, endless quarreling and open immorality. More fortunate Belgians failed to grasp that workers saw vice as the only avenue of escape from their brutal lot.

Strikes, of course, occurred. Repression was terrible. Police beat, imprisoned and shot workers. Belgian Bishops, judging that their intervention on the workers' behalf would provoke bloody class warfare, did nothing.

One group in all Belgium did rise to the workers' defense - the Socialists. Anti-clerical, anti-church, they were the only powerful and dependable protectors the poorer classes knew.

As Joseph grew older he heard of the strikes and demonstrations in the mines and factories. He learned about the women in Halle's artificial-silk factory who, half-drugged from the ether used to manufacture silk, were prey to all sorts of immorality. Joseph also saw the drunks on the town square. He knew of the family fights. His young heart was already heavy with the pain the workers suffered.

VOCATION

Now fourteen, Joseph was completing his final years at the Notre Dame Institute in Halle. His mother and father looked forward to the lad's taking a job. Joseph's extra income would be more than welcome in the Cardijn family. But two years

painful matter of informing his work-worn father.

One night, after the children were asleep, Joseph slipped from his bed to the kitchen below, where his father and mother were enjoying a final cup of coffee before retiring. "Papa," he said, "I want to be a priest. I want your permission not to go to work. I want to carry on with school." Henry Cardijn looked steadily at his son and then turned to Louise. "Woman, we have already worked hard, but if we, small folk as we are, could have the joy of giving our son to God, well, we'll work on a bit more."

Joseph never forgot his father's sacrifice. He always felt Henry Cardijn went to an early grave because he took upon himself this extra burden of work for his son's sake.

A KNIFE THROUGH THE HEART

In the fall of 1897, Joseph entered the minor seminary at Malines. Happy and content, the young seminarian manifested a tremendous aptitude for learning. He couldn't wait for the first holidays to return home and share his joy with his parents and former schoolmates. After a warm welcome at the Cardijn household, Joseph went to visit his friends now at work in the factories, mines and mills. The seminarian's warm smile soon disappeared at the cold and bitter reception his friends gave him. In their eyes he was a "little priest" who had betrayed them and joined ranks

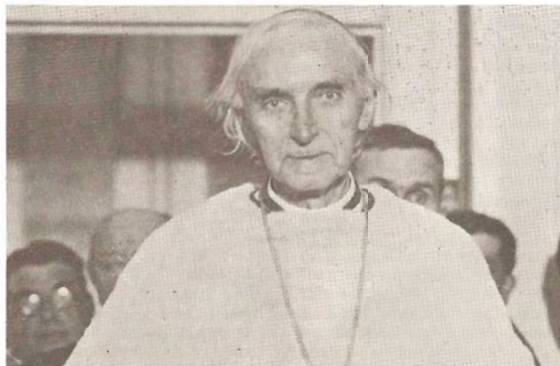
with the very forces the working people felt oppressed them. Joseph's old buddies had connected the capitalists and the Church, and nothing the young man said could change their minds. Their rejection wounded the sensitive Cardijn deeply. "It was like," he later remembered, "a knife through my heart."

Joseph was even more troubled to see how a few months in the factories and mines had changed his classmates. In school they had been mischievous but honest young people, intelligent and keen. Factory life was already blunting their minds, blighting their morals, and destroying their sense of personal dignity. Cardijn vowed inwardly to consecrate his priestly life to the workers.

Six years after Joseph began his studies, his father died. As the young man stood by Henry's bedside he once more made a vow: "Father," he declared, "you worked long years for me to become a priest; I will give my life to saving the working classes of the world."

In 1906, three years following Henry's death, Joseph was due for ordination. Seminary authorities were uncertain whether to promote him to the priesthood. "You are too independent," the Rector advised him.

Intelligent, dynamic, thoughtful, and indeed independent, Joseph was a born leader. He could be a force for great harm or great good. His evident spirit of prayer and obedience and loyalty to the Church finally convinced his superiors that Cardijn was worth the risk. Despite misgivings, Cardinal Mercier ordained him a priest on September 22, 1906.



Belgium's saintly Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Malines, faced innumerable crises with wisdom and courage. A skilled diplomat, dedicated scholar, and strong leader, he respected and loved Cardijn. Joseph often acted as his spokesman during the German occupation in World War I. But there must have been days when the good Cardinal wished Father Cardijn had joined another diocese.

MERCIER THE PIONEER

Cardinal Desire Mercier, Archbishop of Malines, was a man of vision and courage. Recognising Joseph's talents and burning desire to serve the workers, Mercier sent him to study social doctrine under Professor Brants of the University of Louvain. Brants was pioneering the Catholic effort to address itself to the suffering of the working class. The professor urged Joseph to travel throughout Europe to experience at first hand various social programmes

already functioning on the workers' behalf. Sensing Joseph's talents and aware of the young priest's lack of funds, Brants often paid for Joseph's study trips out of his own pocket.

The money was well spent. Joseph was deeply moved by the energy and sense of sacrifice he met so often among those, particularly Socialists and union leaders, who had dedicated themselves to improving the workers' lot. His experience in England, Germany, and France confirmed what his constant studies indicated: that youth was the key to resolving Europe's social question.

Within his own lifetime Cardijn would hear another European say, "Give me our youth and I will give you the world." That man was Adolf Hitler.

At the end of Joseph's first year of study, Cardinal Mercier assigned him to teach literature and mathematics at a middle-class boy's secondary school in Basse-Wavre, Belgium.

Although disappointed, Joseph accepted the appointment in a spirit of faith and obedience. He dubbed his new post "a providential misfortune." With customary energy, Father Cardijn threw himself into his teaching. Recognising his dedication and concern for them, his students admired and loved their new teacher. Joseph made severe demands upon them, but they cheerfully accepted his challenges. The young priest nevertheless felt ill at ease teaching literature and mathematics to financially secure middle-class boys. His heart continued to ache for the workers.

His assignment's "providential misfortune" gave Joseph one advantage. During long school holidays he continued to journey through Europe, observing various social action programmes. He read and stored knowledge for the day when he could engage in his own programmes. That day took twelve long years to come.

THE ROYAL PARISH

Finally at Easter, 1912, Cardinal Mercier assigned Father Cardijn to the Royal Parish of Our Lady of Laeken, Brussels, where Dean Coorman was

pastor. According to the custom which still obtains in Belgium, each priest has his own house in the parish. Louise Cardijn came to set up housekeeping for her son, and Joseph began his work in Laeken.

The tree-lined entrance to the palace of Belgium's king and queen is close by the church of Our Lady of Laeken; thus the title of "The Royal Parish." Sightseers often filled the beautiful gardens that Joseph could view from his front window. One part of "The Royal Parish," however, few tourists visited. Indeed, even parish priests entered there reluctantly. That was Laeken's working-class district, where thirteen thousand underpaid and overworked factory hands were jammed into crowded and unhealthy tenements.

THE SOCIALISTS

It was a damp, cold grey morning, and Father Cardijn was doing what he did every morning since his arrival at Laeken. He was in the streets greeting workers going to the factories. Priests rarely went into Laeken's Socialist streets because anti-clericals insulted them and hurled stones from tenement roofs upon them. Cardijn, however, had enormous reserves of courage. Walking beside the labourers, he asked them about their family's health, their jobs, their hopes and dreams. "Are you getting enough to eat? How are the children doing in school? How are things at the factory?" He never asked about their Mass attendance or religious practice. Joseph would have gone right into the factories with his workers, but at



A place of pilgrimage since the ninth century, the shrine of Our Lady of Laeken is dear to the Belgium people. In these streets and in this church (left) Father Cardijn finally began his life's work. The placid facade of Cardijn's house (right) concealed the bustling activity within. Louise Cardijn always had a snack for the many visitors.



"Together we can conquer the world!" Cardijn told his followers. This pioneer group were neither radicals nor revolutionaries, but completely Christians.

each factory gate a sign warned: "Workers only." Father Cardijn was not that easily put off. He had already begun to develop plans to bring the Gospel inside factory gates. The workers themselves would be his apostles.

Dean Coorman had put Father Cardijn in charge of Laeken girls' Youth Club. Thirty girls of ages twelve to thirteen composed the club. The young priest focused all his years of study, travel, and prayer, like a laser beam, on this humble little group. Within a few months, the Laeken girls' club claimed many new members, ranging from eleven years to middle-aged professional women. Cardijn organised the ladies according

to their type or place of employment, into individual groups called "cells," and challenged each cell to christianize its own world of work. At cell meetings the groups followed a definite and unvarying procedure. First, the girls would consider a particular problem in their own place of employment. Next they would study a Christian social teaching bearing on the problem, and finally the group would read and reflect on a Gospel passage. Then the cell would form a plan of action which provided a Christian solution to the problem. Joseph called this his "See, judge, and act" plan.

Cardijn always dreamed huge dreams, but one wonders, as he



By deeds more than words (left to right), Paul Garcet, Fernand Tonnet, and Jacques Meert helped lay the YCW foundation. Garcet and Tonnet gave the movement its first "martyrs" when they died at Dachau in 1945. Meert survived the war to inspire a new YCW generation.

laboured in these early days with the young ladies of Laeken, if he could foresee that his "See, judge and act" would eventually be translated into countless languages and become a plan of study and action for young workers in all quarters of the globe.

From the very beginning of his work, Joseph limited his role to that of chaplain, or spiritual director, for the groups. He forced these young, inexperienced and hesitant girls to make and carry out their own decisions. "They have to be able to do it themselves," he insisted; "they have to fly on their own wings."

Joseph established an intense programme of spiritual formation as

the root of all study and apostolic activity. His young workers, particularly his leaders, spent much time in prayer, recollection and spiritual retreat. Father Cardijn himself made a Holy Hour each morning before Mass and beginning his enormously busy day.

Affected by the girls' enthusiasm and rapidly growing success, Fernand Tonnet, a bank clerk, begged Cardijn in 1912 to establish similar units for men. The priest gladly obliged, and within months the Union of Apprentices and the League of Pius X, the new men's groups, numbered nine hundred members.

THE GUNS OF AUGUST

Joseph had never been happier. After two and a half years at Laeken, his workers' movement was having great success in restoring a sense of dignity to his parish's poorer classes. Little by little, tenement dwellers returned to regular religious practice. People crowded Cardijn's confessional. A dynamic preacher, Joseph explained the Gospel in terms people understood. He challenged them to bring the Gospel from church into their world. "You are the apostles, you are fishers of men, and only you can bring Christ to your factory, mill or office." He proclaimed this constantly and tirelessly from the Laeken pulpit. In August, 1914, German armies, aiming to capture Paris, burst across the Belgium plains, wreaking death and frightful destruction all about them. Joseph mobilised young people and gathered food, medicines, clothing, and fuel for soldiers and other war victim families. In November, 1916, Cardijn, who had worked actively in the underground since the war's start, spoke out publicly against unjust German aggression and deportation of Belgian workers to German war factories. German military authorities arrested him a month later and sentenced him to thirteen months in prison. This unhappy turn of events proved a cruel blow for Joseph's mother, Louise. Worried about her imprisoned son's always fragile health, Mrs. Cardijn suffered a nervous breakdown from which she never fully recovered. Joseph suffered more deeply from his

mother's trials than from any prison experience.

Even in jail, Cardijn made the best of things. "What makes prison bearable," he wrote, "is the passionate desire and ardent hope of getting back to work with a thousand times more enthusiasm than before . . . Suffering stiffens one's courage in the face of obstacles and difficulties." Joseph used prison time to analyse and reflect upon his workers' movement and to plan new directions. He read the Bible, Carl Marx, and endless tracts on social conditions. No stranger to espionage, Joseph smuggled out his own writings from prison and in turn received books and material through the underground.

Cardijn had served only half his sentence when the Germans released him. No sooner was he out of jail than Joseph organised a young ladies' group to report on the movements of munitions trains. The invaders broke up the ring, and this time arrested Joseph on an espionage charge and sentenced him to ten years' hard labour. Fortunately the Armistice came in November of that same year of 1918. Joseph emerged from prison, eager to meet a troubled post-war Europe's many challenges.

BORN FOR CONFLICT

In 1915 Cardinal Mercier had appointed Joseph to be Diocesan Social Action Director for the Brussels area. The priest viewed the new office as a vehicle for carrying his workers' movement to areas beyond the Laeken parish. Now, with



The prison cell – a symbol of repression. Like so many original thinkers and courageous men, Cardijn was imprisoned during World War I and World War II. In the end his captors could never change his creative mind nor crush his energetic spirit.

war over, Father Cardijn turned to this great task. His innovative methods, however, ran into immediate and unyielding resistance from priests, politicians, businessmen and even Catholic trade unionists. Joseph's technique of encouraging workers to make their own decisions and act upon them frightened the traditionalists. Irritated by the insufferable patronising attitudes of diocesan authorities, Joseph accused them of squelching the legitimate rights of labourers to participate in the direction and control of their own movements. "You neither know nor trust the workers you profess to serve," Joseph charged. After several bitter battles,

Father Cardijn, unable to sway the regional leadership to his views, moved his headquarters to another place, and split the Brussels Catholic workers' movement right down the middle. With Mercier's permission Joseph continued to organise workers according to his own ideas. Fernand Tonnet, returning from the war, joined with Paul Garcet, another clerk, and Jacques Meert, an iron-worker, to assist Cardijn. The trio of laymen, called the "Three Musketeers," pioneered the young workers' movement, officially known as the "Trade Union Youth," with great success throughout the Brussels area.

In Europe they call them "the masses." They are the Continent's working class. During Europe's bloody wars, they fought in the trenches, lost their families in bombardments and air raids, and suffered the humiliation of occupation and defeat. They paid and paid again for their leaders' mistakes.

Life in peacetime was scarcely better for them.

They worked in frightful conditions, often suffered injustice and exploitation at the hands of their employers. They felt that even the Church had betrayed them. "The working classes are being lost to the Church" warned the Popes.



And so indeed it seemed – until Joseph Cardijn came to them and offered them a new vision of life and a new hope for a better world.

Below, Father Cardijn (inset) speaks to the young Belgian workers on pilgrimage to the Coliseum in Rome. Here it was said that the blood of martyrs became the seed of Christians. Cardijn dreamed a great dream for his workers. His greatest dream was that all workers, indeed all men, would be reunited in Christ.



THE CONVALESCENT

The gruelling job of propagating his movement, the imprisonment, the worry about his mother, and the tension resulting from disagreements from the social action department finally caught up with Joseph in the winter of 1919. Tuberculosis, which had claimed his sister and brother, now struck him. As a discharged political prisoner, Father Cardijn was sent by the government to its military hospital at Cannes, France.

The separation from his young workers at this critical moment proved a terrible trial of faith for Joseph. A supreme realist, Cardijn knew his political enemies would attack his fledgling flock. He poured out a torrent of advice to his leaders in endless letters. "Don't let anyone discourage you; all those who want to scale the heights must pass through the dark night of trial . . . Be hard as a diamond and tender as a mother. Call more and more for self-sacrifice, love and commitment."

He begged the Three Musketeers in Brussels to nourish the workers' spiritual life. Warning them to remember that, before all else, they were Christians, he pointed out that their social action was simply an outpouring of Christian love. "Miss no opportunity to make fresh appeals to the workers' spirit of apostolate; it is the spirit that gives life and overflows," he wrote. He warned them not to yield an inch on retaining leadership within the workers' ranks. "It's got to be a real, autonomous union, youth's very own . . . Don't let any parish priest get any mistaken ideas on this point."

After long months of convalescence, health authorities permitted Cardijn to return to Brussels. He came back with a head full of dreams, a heart full of hope, and a spirit bursting with energy. He needed all the strength he could muster. During the next five years he was to be tried as gold in the furnace.

THE ENEMIES' LIST

During those five years, Cardijn remembered: "I ploughed through the whole Brussels area, . . . through the whole country of Belgium. I spoke despite my weak lungs. I shouted, at all the local and regional meetings, to adults, to youths, to committees, general assemblies, retreats, priests' meetings. I came back every night worn out and started out again the following day, and all this in the midst of criticism, intrigue and accusations circulating everywhere. I carried on all the same, . . . sure that I was following the call of the good God."

In the midst of all this hard work and suffering, Cardijn suffered the saddest blow of his life. His seventy-three-year-old mother, Louise, died in 1923. Her loss was irreparable. Even in her illness she had been a tower of strength for him.

If thousands of young workers held Cardijn in deep affection, there were thousands of Belgians who saw him as a madman, a bull in a china shop. In their milder moments his enemies called him a pied piper, a Napoleon, and a Communist. We cannot print what they called him when they were angry – which was often.



*In his middle years
Cardijn feared for his times.
"The first half of the
twentieth century," he wrote,
"will see the birth of a new
world. It will not come about
without revolution, fighting
and destruction. There has
been too much anger stored,
too much suffering endured,
too much injustice
perpetrated, too many crimes
committed for the new order
to be established in peace and
serenity."*

The old guard of Catholic social politicians, who aimed to organise Belgium's labouring class into a single powerful political force, would never forgive Cardijn for establishing his autonomous workers' organisations in 1919. Considering Joseph a source of disunity in their ranks, they felt his movement undermined Catholic efforts to develop a united labour front.

Belgian Bishops, only too well aware that lay movements could get out of hand, feared losing direct control of the workers' movement, and saw him as a pernicious and dangerous influence. Businessmen

thought him a Red, a clerical wolf in sheep's clothing. Of all his enemies, however, none were more active, or, strangely enough, respected him more, than the Socialists. Up until Cardijn appeared, Socialists enjoyed a monopoly on workers' movements. They were not going to let this upstart priest break their stranglehold. Because Socialists would strike factories employing the Trade Union Youth, many employers refused to hire Joseph's followers.

Unfortunately, many of Joseph's foes neither appreciated nor understood his goals. His movement indeed had certain social aims. It set

out to ensure workers proper apprenticeship and professional training, fair wages, good working conditions, moral protection, the gathering of unemployment funds, and decent housing. But his fundamental purpose was to restore his young people's sense of personal dignity, to awaken in them their true value as brothers and sisters in Christ. He chose to develop the workers spiritually, intellectually, and culturally, and to encourage their apostolic activity. To emphasise his organisation's difference from that of the Catholic trade unions, he changed its title from "Trade Union Youths" to "Young Christian Workers" (YCW) in the spring of 1924.

THE MAN IN THE MIDDLE

At the Belgium Catholic Youth Association Congress in the fall of 1924, thousands of workers and hundred of priests joined to determine the orientation of Catholic Action. For the first time, young workers presented themselves as a distinctive unit within the body of the Congress. Twelve hundred delegates claimed the factual existence of the Young Christian Workers movement and chose their leaders. When the issue of the newly entitled YCW came to the floor, the convention crashed into pandemonium. Joseph's young workers began chanting their by now famous cry of "Cardijn! - Cardijn! - Cardijn!"

Young conventioners cheered loudly and long. Older Catholic leaders and chaplains were furious. They feared that Cardijn's plan to

form an autonomous workers' youth movement, if successful, would dry up their source of candidates for the regular Catholic Action organisations. One priest accused Cardijn and his trade union youth of "carving up the Mystical Body of Christ."

A few days later, Belgian Bishops gathered at Cardinal Mercier's office to analyze the explosion Joseph had touched off at the Congress. Cardinal Mercier summoned Joseph to his office and, in the presence of clerical and lay worker movement leaders, accused the priest of destroying Belgian Catholic unity. The charge stunned Cardijn. Although Mercier did not approve of Joseph's methods, the Cardinal had never forbidden him to pioneer his Trade Union Youth or YCW. When Joseph left the Catholic Social Action department in 1919, Mercier had helped to provide the priest with a new building for his splinter movement's headquarters. Cardinal Mercier was under tremendous pressure. Belgium's wealthy classes, the political leaders and several influential clergymen were insisting that Mercier burst Joseph's bubble once and for all. Mercier realised that Cardijn was not without support both from the working classes and from some middle and upper-class people who understood and appreciated his movement. Now, a man in the middle with no-where to turn, the Cardinal must have thought many times of the pressure seminary authorities had mounted against Joseph's ordination in 1906. Here he was, confronting this priest once

again. The Cardinal liked Joseph personally, and suffered much at this turn of events.

But leave it to Joseph to give Cardinal Mercier a perfect "out." The embattled priest suggested that the Cardinal give him permission to visit Rome and put his case before Pope Pius XI. Mercier gladly bucked his headache as high as it could go.

When word spread about Cardijn's proposed Roman visit, his enemies breathed a huge sigh of relief. This unknown Belgian priest, they figured, would never get near the Pope to explain his case. At best he would see the Pope in an audience, kiss his hand, exchange a few pleasantries, and then be dismissed. According to this scenario, Cardijn would then return to Belgium, a defeated man, and wind up a forgotten priest in some country parish. As usual, his foes underestimated Joseph Cardijn. For knowledge of Joseph's work had reached Belgium's papal nuncio, Cardinal Micara. It was probably Micara who undertook the delicate task of arranging an interview at the Vatican for Joseph with Pope Pius XI.

THE POPE SPEAKS

"My son, what do you want?" the Pope inquired as the interview began. Cardijn, normally a most courageous man, suddenly lost his nerve and then, boiling with emotion, blurted, "Holy Father, I want to give my life to save the young workers; if need be, I want to die for the working people."



Pope Pius XI ruled the Church between two World Wars. It was a time of cynicism and despair. For this Pope, Cardijn's YCW offered genuine hope for the world's working classes

"Finally," the Pope exclaimed, "someone speaks to me of the working classes."

For more than an hour the Pope listened as Joseph carefully explained his movement and its purposes. The Belgian priest was saying things the Pope wanted to hear. As the interview ended, the Pope advised Cardijn, "Not only do we bless your movement – we make it our own."

THE BIRTHDAY

Joseph returned to Brussels with great joy. Cardinal Mercier now approved the Young Christian Workers. His enemies continued to harass him, but not with their former effectiveness. "We are concerned neither with Socialism nor with Communism," Cardijn responded to these attacks, "but with the souls and destiny of our young workers."

At the July, 1925, Bishops' annual meeting, hierarchy members who had formerly bitterly disapproved Joseph's programme, supported it openly. This was the official birthday of the YCW. The movement now took giant strides among Belgium's six hundred thousand young workers. By the year's end, the YCW claimed twenty thousand boys and girls from the ages of thirteen and twenty-one.

"We are not making a revolution," Joseph told his enthusiastic followers; "we *are* the revolution!" The revolution aimed, not to reform society but to develop within the hearts of the young Christian workers the realisation of their mission in life – to be apostles spreading the Gospel to their working world. Joseph kept the movement's

spiritual orientation in the forefront. His youngsters studied the Gospels and the Social Encyclicals, prayed together, and united in liturgical worship. He challenged them to learn more and more.

"Do people show confidence in your movement?" It was Pius XI questioning Cardijn during an interview at the Vatican in 1927. "Holy Father," Cardijn replied, "there are still plenty who do not believe in it: priests particularly."

"Very well, come to Rome with your YCW. The Pope will then show everyone what he thinks of working youth and the YCW." Cardijn responded with delight. Ever since his childhood in Halle, Joseph had loved religious demonstrations and processions. Now he had an opportunity to bring worldwide attention to the YCW. Returning to his Brussels headquarters, he announced, "We don't have large financial resources, but we can save what little money we have. We've got to organise this pilgrimage and do it in the best way possible." For two years they worked, and in the autumn of 1929 fifteen hundred Belgian YCW men entrained for Rome. (The girls had their turn in 1931.) The young men formed processions and attended special workers' Masses in Rome. At their papal audience, each YCW member, dressed in fresh work clothes, carried the tools of his trade. The Pope greeted each one individually and questioned the workers for nearly three hours about their work and apostolate. "I consider you to be the missionaries of the Church to the world of work," the Pope explained



The youthful exuberance, sense of mission, and spirit of joy fostered by the YCW often expressed itself in religious demonstrations. Young workers delighted to proclaim their new-found solidarity in songs and pageants.

as he bade the YCW group a reluctant good-bye.

YCW INTERNATIONAL

As the Pope promised, the YCW Vatican visit attracted the attention of many priests and Bishops in various countries of the world. The first large YCW international extension was soon established in France. Then country by country, nation by nation, continent by continent, the YCW spread through Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas. In 1934, the year before the YCW's tenth anniversary, Joseph had a forty-foot statue of a young worker struck and placed on the roof of the headquarters in

Brussels. This touched off one more chorus of criticism from his enemies. But for Joseph it was important for people to see, in the heart of Brussels, a fine building dedicated to the world's young workers.

THE TENTH BIRTHDAY

After a year's preparation, the YCW held its tenth birthday celebrations in Brussels. Priests and Bishops joined young worker delegates from all over Europe, Africa, and Asia. To Cardijn, full of happiness and joy, this day seemed the pinnacle of his career. Alexis Carrel, the great French scientist and a friend of Cardijn, wrote him: "Your

YCW is a new concept of life. The success of your organisation is one of the great events of our times."

Throughout Joseph's tumultuous life, moments of deep happiness always prefaced some vast tragedy. A few years after the anniversary, in the spring of 1940, the Germans once again invaded Belgium. Just after this German occupation, Alexis Carrel wrote a last note to Cardijn. "It is of great importance," the doctor wrote, "that your work continues even in the midst of chaos, for it is from the midst of chaos that civilisation will have to be rebuilt. Our only hope in the prodigious catastrophe that has fallen upon us is this new flame that burns in our youth."

UNDERGROUND AGAIN

Now nearly sixty years old, Cardijn threw himself and his YCW into opposition to the occupation forces. They smuggled young men and women from forced labour battalions and rescued them from deportation to German factories. Through clandestine networks he passed Jews and downed Allied aviators to freedom. Soon the Gestapo arrested Cardijn and several YCW leaders and administered to them their well-known interrogation. Joseph underwent several successive grillings during his first few weeks in prison. The Nazis tossed him into a crowded cell, where he could neither pray, study or reflect.

In September, 1942, the Nazis released him from prison. The courageous Cardijn refused to leave prison unless others captured with

him were released at the same time. The Nazis threw him out anyway, and within a short time Cardijn was back doing all he could to help the victims of the brutal occupation.

LIBERATION

In August, 1944, the Allies forced the German army to begin its retreat from Brussels. The Nazis took hostages to protect themselves as they left. On the morning of September 1, German soldiers burst into YCW headquarters to take Cardijn hostage. From his chapel Joseph saw the Nazis before they saw him and, slipping out the back door, jumped over a garden wall and concealed himself in the ruins of a bombed-out house next door. From this hiding place, Cardijn watched German soldiers excitedly scouring YCW headquarters. Frightened because of the Allied forces' imminent arrival, the German soldiers hastened through their fruitless search. As soon as they left, Cardijn, covered with plaster and dust, reappeared. YCW staff members, whose nerves were stretched taut, could not control their laughter at the sight of their chaplain.

But all did not end happily. Fernand Tonnet and Paul Garcet, two of the Three Musketeers, died at Dachau; they had been prisoners since June, 1943. News of their deaths shook Joseph deeply. Hundreds of YCW's died during the war. However, the war and the dispersal of young Belgian workers into forced labour camps helped spread the YCW's message among Dutch, French, Hungarian, Ukrainian, Austrian, and

"One of the greatest joys of a man," Cardijn exclaimed, "is to communicate the truth that has raised him up, the feeling that grips him, the thrill and emotions with which he trembles. When he sees his listeners are heart and mind with him, he feels a kind of self-multiplication; his soul is passed into theirs and his thoughts penetrate their minds."



A Belgian family gave the building (below) for a YCW international headquarters in Brussels.



German youths. All the sacrifices, sufferings, experiences, and stamina under trial gave fresh impetus to YCW efforts in the post-war world. The last tanks had not yet clanked out of Belgium when Cardijn was already rallying the youth and exploiting the international fervor which the war had unwittingly added to his movement.

NEITHER RED NOR DEAD

Beginning in June, 1946, and continuing on for the following twenty-one years, Canon Cardijn made no less than twenty-four international journeys. He travelled to any country he could reach to spread the YCW message. Tirelessly he went from meeting to meeting, from school to seminary, to chancery office, to employers. He experienced, especially as he travelled through the Third World, the terrible injustice that characterised our post-war civilisation. On more than one occasion, Cardijn spoke out against the great Western powers' refusal to acknowledge the good points in Communism and to work out a positive response to its spread. After visiting one South American country, he wrote: "If Pius XII were to go there today and speak his teachings regarding charity and justice for the working people, well, I can assure you he would soon be denounced as a Communist and put in prison."

Pope Pius XII in his turn continued to challenge Cardijn and the YCW to witness, before the post-

war world and the gradual, inexorable rising tide of Communism, the twofold vocation of the YCW – to be workers and Christians.

On the YCW's silver anniversary in 1950, Pope Pius XII honoured the YCW movement by consecrating Cardijn a bishop. Colleges and universities throughout the world bestowed honorary doctorates upon him. The humble Belgian priest received civic decorations and became a member of the French Legion of Honor. He accepted these distinctions cheerfully, not for himself but for his movement. By 1950, the YCW was established in no less than sixty countries through the world.

GIFT OF WONDER

The little boy who delighted at the human talents expressed on Halle's town square, never really changed. He always retained his gift of wonder. As he journeyed now about the world, he marvelled at the great scientific miracles he beheld. Jet planes, skyscrapers, mechanical marvels in factories and mines amazed him. He never ceased to hope for a new and better world. When the Americans landed a man on the moon, Cardijn wrote himself a note "to think out adapted pastoral methods." As he travelled, his knowledge of the world and its various religions deepened. He sensed that men, regardless of race or creed or colour, actually shared far more spiritual values than differences.

'PAPA JOHN'

Once in conversation, Cardijn suggested to Pope John XXIII, "It would be good if Your Holiness would prepare a new encyclical on labour."

"Write down your ideas," the Pope responded, "regarding the future development of the working classes." The notes that Cardijn submitted formed the basis of Pope John's encyclical *Mater et Magistra*. Pope John also tapped Cardijn's talents and experience for the Second Vatican Council. Two major documents, the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* and the *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*, owe much to Cardijn's genius.

Bishop Cardijn celebrated his eightieth birthday in December, 1962. Thousands gathered in Brussels at the Palace of Sports to join in the celebration. The birthday gift that made Joseph happiest, however, was the establishment of the YCW in its eighty-eighth country, Madagascar.

Despite his age, Joseph continued his daily punishing schedule. He threw himself into schemes for improving education, combating juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, and alcoholism. He tried to sell Western powers on replacing the military draft with an international Peace Corps. His vision continued to widen and deepen as he met the world's young workers: black miners in South Africa, Indian banana workers in Nicaragua, street kids in New York, factory workers in Italy. He attempted to pierce the Iron Curtain, but was rebuffed. As the YCW movement grew larger and larger, Cardijn felt



John and Joseph – two great priestly hearts.

more and more the weariness of age, but he continued to drive himself. The long journeys were taking a terrible toll. Finally, in January of 1965, Joseph resigned as the YCW's chief chaplain, and Father Uylenbroeck, a veteran YCW chaplain, took over as chief chaplain. Now Bishop Cardijn could turn his full attention to implementing the decisions of the Second Vatican Council. He complained that, as yet,



As Bishop, Joseph Cardijn found his greatest happiness when he ordained the many former YCW members who became priests. More than three hundred contemplatives, priests, Brothers and nuns came from the ranks of his organisation.

so many segments of the Church did not realise the proper role of the laity. "If the layman is not permitted to assume his proper role," Cardijn often commented, "the Church will completely lose its grip on Europe."

CARDINAL CARDIJN

Two weeks after Joseph retired as international chaplain of the YCW, Pope Paul VI appointed him Cardinal. The honor created a great personal crisis for Joseph. "I can't go against my vow to give my whole life to the working class!" he exclaimed. "Is it the devil who torments me, or is it the Holy Spirit rousing me?" Cardijn's conscience was set at ease when Pope Paul advised him, "You are to continue talking on the YCW all over the world, and now with much more

influence." Cardinal Cardijn continued to travel all over Europe and to plan trips abroad. He was now attempting to maneuver permission to visit China. After a particularly long lecture series, a priest questioned him, "Cardinal Cardijn, you must be very tired after all that." The Cardinal smiled and said, "An old man is always tired; but a good priest is never old." He spoke often of death. Like Therese of Lisieux in her beliefs about her afterlife, he was convinced that his work for the world's youth would continue in eternity. A radio commentator once inquired, "What is death for you, Your Eminence?" Cardijn answered, "It is to carry on living; it is a passover, a transition." "What will you do in heaven?" the announcer continued. "Well," Cardijn responded, "the same thing I am doing now - I will work for youth."



His body rests today in the Laeken church, hard by the pulpit and confessional he loved so well. He had fulfilled his vow: to serve the workers.

THE FINAL JOURNEY

In June 1967, Cardijn was stricken with a kidney ailment. Cardinal Suenens, Archbishop of Brussels, came to the hospital to administer the Sacrament of the Sick to Cardijn. As Cardinal Suenens anointed him, Joseph continued to pray, "I offer all my sufferings for the world's working classes."

After surgeons removed gallstones and kidney stones, Joseph picked up strength, but it was illusory. Suddenly, on July 14, he lapsed into coma. The King of Belgium came, paid him a long and moving visit, but the Cardinal did not recognise him. During the night, agitated and confused, Joseph thought the Sister nursing him was a woman of the Red guard who would not let him go to Peking. After a few days' delirium, Joseph surprisingly

regained clear consciousness. His thinking cleared and he seemed to be peaceful and tranquil. In his last hours he repeated over and over: "We are at the beginning. We are always at the beginning. All my life God has been so good to me; it is beautiful, it is so beautiful. And what shall we do after all of this?"

On the night of July 24, his nurse felt his pulse and found him peaceful. "Is there anything you need?" she gently inquired. "No, thank you, Sister," he replied. "Everything is just right as it is." Those were Joseph Cardijn's last words on earth. Somehow, that reply characterised his whole life. He took people and things as he met them and consecrated them to the Lord.

Cardinal Cardijn still lives on in the YCW, which is presently functioning in 109 countries.

Y.C.W. IN ENGLAND AND WALES

News of the YCW came to England following the tenth anniversary celebrations of the Belgium YCW held at the Heysel stadium in 1935. Following isolated attempts at starting the YCW, the first proper section was established in Wigan in February 1937. Fr Gerard Rimmer was its chaplain and Pat Keegan was one of the first leaders.

Official recognition by the Hierarchy of England and Wales came in 1939 in which year the first National Study weekend took place, attended by delegates from 25 sections. 'Young Worker', the movement's monthly magazine which started in 1938 in duplicated form with 300 copies, had reached 1,000 and was now printed. It reached 30,000 per month at its peak.

Post War Developments

Despite the effects of call-up during the war years, the movement not only survived but increased in size. By 1950 there were 244 sections. 15,000 attended the Christ the King rallies and we were selling 100,000 christmas cards. 1950 also marked the official launch of the pre-YCW which by the end of that year had 133 registered groups.

A New World

The fifties saw many changes, full employment, the establishment of the Welfare State, raising of the school leaving age and the ending of war time austerity and restrictions.

1956 was devoted to the preparation of the Rome pilgrimage to take place the following year (postponed from 1939) including a scientific survey into the religious life of young people. 8,300 questionnaires were completed. Some 1,200 members took part in the pilgrimage from England and Wales and joined 30,000 members from around the world in this wonderful spectacle.

Pat Keegan resigned as International President at the first International Council following the pilgrimage to Rome in September 1957 and was succeeded by Rom Maione from Canada. The following year saw the departure of Fr Edward Mitchinson, the National chaplain after a 13 year stint. In 1961 the second World Council took place in Rio de Janeiro. Succeeding World Councils have taken place at Bangkok 1965, Beirut 1969, Linz, Austria 1975, Mechelen 1981 and Madrid 1983. In 1986 the YCW of England and Wales, France, Italy and Malta decided to leave the International YCW and form a new

International co-ordination of Young Christian Workers (ICYCW).

THE 60's

We entered the 60's by celebrating the 21st birthday of the Movement dating from its official recognition in 1939.

In 1964, some 120 delegates from England attended the first European Congress held in Strasbourg. The 2,000 delegates were joined by 30,000 YCW's from all over Europe at the Rally which followed the end of the Congress.

The Second Vatican Council started its work in 1965. Joseph Cardijn was created a Cardinal by Pope Paul VI. The Council's documents on the church, the Church in the Modern World and the Laity had been powerfully influenced by the ideas of the Movement. In December 1966, 3,000 YCW's from all over Britain attended a Rally at the Royal Albert Hall in London. This was to be Cardinal Cardijn's last appearance in England before his death in 1967.

Cardijn Centenary Celebrations

In May 1979 a National Rally was held in Liverpool attended by 2,000 members to launch the YCW Charter – a new future for young workers. Three years later in November 1982 a Festival was held to celebrate the centenary of Cardijn's birth. It took place at the Guild Hall, Preston. The occasion was graced with the attendance of most of the Bishop's from England and Wales. On their behalf Cardinal Basil Hume issued a

challenging statement proclaiming the urgent need for men and women to be actively involved in the World of Work, Trade Unions, politics and social issues. It was a significant tribute to the YCW that this occasion was used to deliver such a proclamation.

THE Y.C.W. TODAY

The YCW is as active today as in its past. Thousands of young people participate in its various activities and carry out an apostolate amongst their contemporaries. The work is carried out in over 100 parish based sections served by a team of fulltime organisers with area offices in Birmingham, Liverpool, London, Manchester and Newcastle Upon Tyne.

Over the past 50 years many changes have taken place in the life and world of the young worker. Over one million unemployed, between the ages of 16–25, widespread drug and alcohol abuse, racialism, violence in the inner cities, increasing influence of the Media are some of the new challenges that are discussed, with a view to taking action by our members.

Cardijn in putting his faith for the future in young people has been fully vindicated by the events of history. His message is as true today as ever. We call on all young people to join us in our task of building a New World through a New Youth.

For further information about the YCW in England and Wales, write to the National Secretary, YCW Headquarters, 120A West Heath Road, London, NW3 7TY.

price 50p

*He had dreamed his dreams
And had seen more than
One of them come true –
His was a full
Priestly life*

