



Cardijn and the founding of the Young Christian Workers Movement

An extract from:

“Towards a strategic Plan for the YCW: A needs analysis”

by Vicky Rattigan

Master of Arts in Management: Community and Voluntary Services

All Hallows College, Dublin, Ireland

August 2009

Joseph Cardijn and the founding of the YCW

Joseph Cardijn was born in Schaerbeek, a district of Brussels in November of 1882 to Henri and Louise Cardijn. They were a typical working class couple of the time who struggled to make ends meet, he as a coachman and gardener and she as a housemaid and cook. After his birth, due to his mother's ill health, young Joseph was sent to Halle, a small market town to live with his mother's relations. It would be some years before he was joined there by his parents, who went on to run a small coal merchants business and cafe from the front room of their home.

As a young boy, Joseph would work alongside his father in the family business after school and during the holidays. His mother held a central place in the family and had an exceptional influence over Joseph's childhood. It was she who would relate scripture stories and instructed her children in the Catholic faith, teaching them all the Mass responses and helping them with their prayers.

At the turn of the century Halle was home to many factories, mills and industries which provided work for both skilled and unskilled men, women and children. The conditions of these places of employment were bad, the work tough and the pay extremely low. There was little or no protection for workers. The children, instead of being sent to school, were often put to work in the factories in order to help support the family. Sociologist, Arthur Vermeersch (1909) describes a typical scene from the time:

...those sickly little boys we used to meet on fine summer evenings, towards six o'clock on the outskirts of an industrial town. ...We would see them, pale-faced, bodies worn out already, a little bowl in their left hand, dragging their feet on the way to a factory. And they were only twelve!

Like the children described above, it was expected that Joseph too would leave his school days behind him and begin working full-time in support of his family, but he had other ideas. In September of 1887 he joined the junior seminary at Malines and began his studies for the priesthood. During the holidays he returned home and paid a visit to some

of his former schoolmates who were now at work in the factories and mills. The reception he received there had a lasting impression on him. To them he had no understanding of their struggle and hardship as workers. Cardijn, in the eyes of his peers, had joined the ranks of the Bourgeoisie and become the “little Priest” whose reality was far removed from the working classes.

It is worth bearing in mind that this was almost one hundred years after the French Revolution (1789) which saw the separation of Church and State, a loss of power by the Catholic Church and a spread of anti-clericalism throughout Europe. The priest, once a figure of authority, respected and feared by many was no longer granted the same level of respect, the Church itself had lost its control over the daily lives of people.

In his book, *The Cardijn Story*, Micheal De La Bedoyere (1958, p.21) describes this period as follows:

By the first decade of the twentieth century when Joseph Cardijn was ordained and embarking on his life's vocation, certain Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, had come to realise far better the nature of the moral, social and political challenge of the Industrial Revolution to Christianity. But it had inevitably been a very slow growth. After all, Christianity in Europe had been powerfully shaken by the growth of secularist humanism, of what perhaps is best described as “progressivism”, in every aspect of life – in philosophy and science, in culture, in politics and now in economics, technique and industry. To all that the French Revolution had meant in an anti-clerical break up of the old order was now added this tremendous sweep of scientific, industrial and political emancipation from the feudal ancien régime, so closely associated with Christian leadership and patronage.

It was such experiences in these early days in Halle along with a change in attitude to the Church and the social order that had a huge influence on the direction Cardijn's life would eventually take. He began to see first-hand the workers struggle and the contradiction between what his Christian faith was telling him and the experiences of his young friends. This contradiction was to form what became known as the Three Truths, the basic principles on which he would found the YCW Movement. This realisation, combined with the early death of his father Henri, led Joseph to dedicate his priestly life to serving the working classes.

Rerum Novarum

During his time at the seminary Cardijn, along with fellow seminarians, formed study circles where they discussed theology, studied books on the teachings of the Church and discussed the issues of the time. In 1891 Pope Leo XIII issued an Encyclical on the "Condition of Labour" entitled *Rerum Novarum*, commonly known as the Workers Charter. This encyclical was the first time the Church had spoken out about the issues of the common man and the world of work and challenged Catholics everywhere to get involved in the struggle for social justice and reform of the social order. This encyclical also addressed the issue of women and children in work and spoke of the need for the organisation of workers, their rights and entitlements and the issue of a just wage. It reaffirmed the God given dignity of each person, the value of the family, endorsed the right to own private property and called upon Governments to regulate working conditions. The issuing of *Rerum Novarum* by the church came at a time when industrialisation, and both secularism and communism, were spreading throughout Europe and followed the publication of Marx's *Das Kapital* (1867) in which he accused religion as being the Opium of the people, allowing them to suffer on earth in order to have their reward in heaven.

Rerum Novarum was to have a profound influence on the Church and led to the establishment of many Movements under the Catholic Action banner. One such movement which Cardijn had come to know during his studies was the Sillon movement. The Sillon was formed in Paris by Marc Sangnier and a group of students calling themselves the Crypt, they later changed their name to Le Sillon after a publication by the same name. *'Their objective was to bring the Church and people together in light of Rerum Novarum and to build democracy in France'* (Gigacz 1997, p.41). Le Sillon brought together young workers and students in study circles to develop methods of action and reflection on the Gospel. Although fundamentally different in its leadership and direction, the Sillon, it seems, planted the seeds in Cardijn's mind for what was to become the YCW.

During his studies and following his ordination to the priesthood, Cardijn spent many holidays travelling and meeting people throughout Europe in an effort to find a solution to the “worker problem”. Among others, he met with Baden Powell of the Scouts movement and English Trade Unionist, Ben Tillett, who left a lasting impression on the young priest. Still Cardijn felt that there was something more needed, something that would build up young workers spiritually while assisting them in answering their own needs. Something that would bridge the gap between what their Christian faith had to say about each one being created in the image and likeness of God and the everyday lived experience of the young workers.

Upon his appointment as curate at Laeken in 1912, Cardijn formed study circles for young girls where they could come together, reflect on their reality as workers and take actions around issues of importance. This organisation of young girls in 1912 was a pioneering move by Cardijn, given that women didn’t receive the right to vote in Belgium until 1919 and much of the so called youth work of the time was carried out amongst young boys. In fact, the founder of the Scouting movement, Baden-Powell, whom Cardijn had met upon his travels, allowed the establishment of the girl’s branch of the Scouts purely on the basis that they would one day be the mothers of future generations of boys (Gibson & Davies, 1967). Following the success of the girls study circles at Laeken there soon followed a section for boys from which came the first leaders of the YCW movement, Paul Garcet, Fernand Tonnet and Jacques Meert. It was with these young workers that Cardijn developed the see, judge, act method that would assist young workers in analysing their own reality. Further groups followed and continued to meet under the banner of the Young Trade Unionists until 1924 when they adopted the name Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne (JOC), the Young Christian Workers was born, a movement that would serve, represent and educate young workers through the method of see, judge, act.

See, Judge, Act

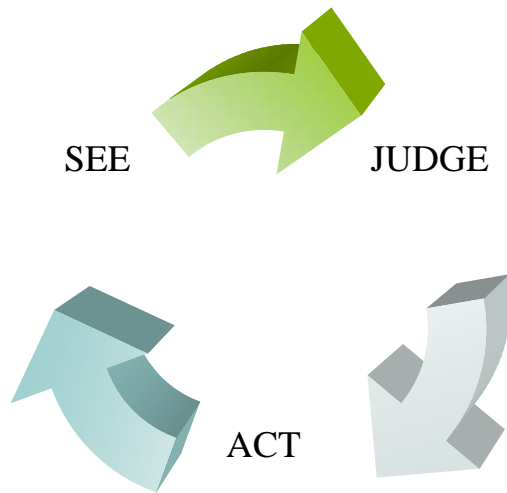
From its early beginnings, the YCW was concerned not with the masses of workers but with the individual and of their ability to bring about change. Young people, taken out of their isolation and organised, could effectively analyse their own particular situations using the see, judge, act method and begin to go some way towards effecting change and influencing the institutions and agencies which hitherto had controlled and dictated the course of their lives.

Adopted and used by many groups and organisations throughout the world encouraging reflection and action on the Gospel message, Cardijn's see, judge, act method (also referred to as the review of life method) is an inductive method of analysis, based on the format of experiential learning and is the method '*to which the methodology of liberation theology's "base Christian" communities is deeply indebted*' (Lakeland 2003, p.26.). See, judge, act was also the method used by the Latin American bishops in drafting the conclusions of their conference at Aparecida Brazil in May 2007 for Pope Benedict (Catholic News. Com, 2007).

This review of life method challenges young people to become aware of the reality of their particular situation, be they in work, unemployed or at school and to plan and implement specific actions to elicit change. It is through attendance at regular meetings that young people are encouraged to enquire into these situations, these issues and events that affect them on a daily basis and to plan and organise specific actions to bring about positive change.

In its Effectiveness Report 2007, the Irish YCW explains the See, Judge, Act method as follows:

See, judge, act - A continuous Process of Reflection and Action



1. Observe – Seeing, hearing, and experiencing the lived reality of individuals and communities.

Carefully and intentionally examining the primary data of the situation. What are the people in this situation doing, feeling, and saying? What is happening to them and how do they respond?

2. Judge – This is the heart of the process and it involves two key parts:

a. Social Analysis -- Obtaining a more complete picture of the social situation by exploring its historical and structural relationships. In this step, we attempt to

make sense of the reality that was observed in Step 1. Why are things this way? What are the root causes?

b. Theological Reflection – Analyzing the experience in the light of Gospel values and social tradition? How do Gospel values and principles help us to see this reality in a different way? How do they serve as a measuring stick for this experience?

3. Act – Planning and carrying out actions aimed at transforming the social structures that contribute to suffering and injustice.

YCW and the Irish context

The development of the YCW in Belgium, Ireland and indeed each country where the movement is present has of course been influenced by the environment in which it works. It is clear from the foundations of the YCW that the life of young workers in Belgium was very different to that of young workers in Ireland today. Young people in Belgium during the 1920's had little education or schooling, they started working life much earlier, worked in extremely bad conditions for little pay and with little or no protection. The Church, for those that wanted it, had a huge influence on people's lives and there was much poverty and hardship. Cardijn founded the YCW in response to all of this and as a means of responding to and answering the needs of the young people of his time.

In contrast to the reality in which Cardijn was responding, the movement in Ireland, since its beginnings here, has worked out of a much different reality throughout its main periods of development. The movement first appeared in Ireland between 1937-1960, with sections in the Ardoyne area of Belfast and in Wexford; 1974 saw the establishment of the first groups in Dublin and Limerick before spreading throughout the country with the height of its membership coming during the 1980's, a time when Ireland was experiencing high levels of unemployment and a surge in youth ministry within the Irish Church. It was at this time the Irish national movement acquired its headquarters on Talbot Street in Dublin and began to employ its first full time workers under the FÁS Team work scheme. In 1994 with a change of leadership, the national office of YCW moved to its current position at 11 Talbot Street in Dublin. The parish structure, which had previously formed the basis for making contact with young people and provided a means for establishing groups, began to be less and less effective and the membership began to shrink. Gallagher (2005) in his study of youth ministry in Ireland since the second Vatican Council states that this decrease in membership within YCW corresponded with a fall off in the participation of young people within the Church in general at this time. During the 1990's it had become increasingly difficult to make contact with young people through the parish structure due to the decline in practice among young people as Gallagher suggests but also due to a general change in culture

and attitude towards anything to do with Church. A contributing factor in this decline was the number scandals within the Church such as the Bishop Casey affair (1992) and revelations of child sexual abuse which continue to affect the church to this day.

Since the 1990's, Ireland has seen unprecedented economic growth with the rise of the Celtic Tiger, due in no small part to a largely young and well educated population. This seemingly meteoric economic success had a huge effect not only on young people but on volunteerism and the demands on people's time in general. Overtime and weekend work became the norm for many in an effort to earn as much money as they could to feed hefty mortgages and maintain what for many were lavish lifestyles. Work was plentiful and people had the opportunity to change from job to job, seeking out better conditions and salaries. Young workers in particular benefited from the opportunities presented by the boom years in terms of high salaries and the availability of work as many multi-national corporations chose to base themselves in Ireland. With this increased availability of work came an influx of migrant workers seeking to find employment here and benefit from the high salaries on offer. The 2006 census (CSO, 2006) indicates that of the 4,239,848 people living in Ireland, almost 420,000 of them were foreign nationals and 1,978,605 of the entire population were between the ages of 15 and 44 years of age. Today however, with the slow-down of the economy and the current recession, many of these workers now find themselves, perhaps for the first time, having to rely on Social Welfare or in increasingly precarious working conditions. Ireland has gone from one of the fastest growing economies with a high level of employment to one where workers are being laid off and businesses closing on a daily basis.

In contrast to those of Cardijn's era, young workers in Ireland today are older, multi-cultural and have better educational opportunities than those of the early 20th century. Since the introduction of free second level education in the mid 1960's and with the introduction of free transport for those from rural backgrounds, young Irish people, unlike their peers of the early 20th Century, have had unlimited access to second level education (Lalor et al. 2007). When it comes to third level education however, the ESRI's School Leavers' Report Survey 2007 shows that young people from lower income

families are much less likely to access third level education than their middle class counterparts. This can only be compounded by the soon to be re-introduced third level fees by the current Irish Government. Despite anecdotal evidence that Irish graduates perform well in comparison to their international counterparts, *'Ireland still has one of the highest levels of functional illiteracy in Europe and a persistent problem with early school leaving'* (Lalor et al. 2007, p.159). For those that do remain in education, many of these young people also engage in seasonal or part time work while studying. As the Irish economy continues to decline however, many of these students and future full time workers may be facing unemployment and the prospects of having to emigrate to find suitable employment.

On a more positive note, when not engaged in studying or work activities there are also many opportunities for young people today to socialise and part-take in the activities of various voluntary, community and youth organisations. Enquiries by YCW groups into free time and leisure have shown that young people view this as a time to do *"what they want to do, when they want to do it, even if that means doing nothing"*, (YCW Group, Dublin 2009). For some one way of spending their free time is through involvement in voluntary or youth activities and organisations. *'Youth work has been enhancing the lives of young people and adults in Ireland for more than 100 years'* (www.youth.ie, 2009). In the 2001 Youth Work Act, youth work was given formal statutory recognition and defined youth work as:

A planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young persons through their voluntary involvement, and which is -

(a) complementary to their formal, academic or vocational education and training; and

(b) provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations.

Also, as mentioned earlier, religious practice among young people in Ireland has declined since the 1990's, secularisation has spread and the moral authority once held by the Catholic Church has been replaced, to some extent, by the media and celebrity. Regular Mass attendance by members of the Catholic faith has been in decline since the late 80's

and stood at 56.4% in September 2008. Weekly mass attendance is down to 43.6% compared to just over half of all Catholics in 2002/3 (O'Mahony, 2008). Despite this general falloff in Mass attendance, this research suggests that young people, while they may not practice their religion or faith through attendance at Mass or other religious service on a regular basis, do in fact have a belief in God or a higher power and have a strong sense of social justice.

With the advent of the computer and social networking sites such as Bebo and Facebook, it is evident that young people's lives in particular have changed over the years. The age at which a young person can legally leave education and take up employment has changed, the hours they are permitted to work and the payment they can expect to receive are now protected by law. Benchmarking and subsequent national wage agreements have improved the conditions for many Irish workers and the Catholic Church is no longer the preserve of spiritual development and moral guidance. The YCW's on line Life Survey (www.ycw.ie) has shown that young workers, whether they are members of a Trade Union or not, are more familiar with their rights as workers; are largely influenced by friends and family; and that their religion, whatever that may be, is important to them.

It is in this context that the Irish YCW sets about responding to the needs of young people in the 16-18 age group, and young workers aged 18-30 years in particular, through its various programmes, campaigns and actions targeted at young people. While local groups are now more difficult to establish outside of the Parish structure, the movement has attracted many individuals through its campaigns and actions and through its online surveys and petitions. Today, the Irish YCW as a movement is in receipt of funding from the Department of Education and Science under the Youth Service Grant Scheme and receives a small subvention from the Irish Episcopal Conference. This funding allows the employment of full-time staff and a part-time National Chaplain and pays for rent on premises in the centre of Dublin. The Irish YCW is also a member of the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI), the representative body for national voluntary youth work organisations in Ireland, is a member of the City of Dublin Youth Service Board

(CDYSB) and maintains links with the International YCW and the International Co-ordination of Young Christian Workers.

Bibliography

Byrne, D, McCoy, S, Watson, D. (2008): *ESRI School Leavers Survey Report 2007*. Dublin: The Economic and Social Research Institute.

De La Bedoyere, M. (1958): *The Cardijn Story*. London: Longmans, Green

Davies B. and A. Gibson (1967): *The Social Education of the Adolescent*. London: University of London.

Gallagher, G. (2005): *Are we losing the young church? Youth Ministry in Ireland from the second Vatican council to 2004*. Dublin: Columba Press.

Gigacz, S. (1997): *The Sillon and the YCW: Towards an understanding of the origins of the IYCW*. Brussels: International Young Christian Workers.

Lakeland P, (2003): *The Liberation of the Laity, In search of an accountable Church*. New York: Continuum Intl. Pub. Group.

Lalor, K., de Róiste, A., Devlin, M. (2007): *Young People in Contemporary Ireland*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan.

Vermeersch, A. (1909): Cited: Fievez, M., Meert, J. (1964): *Cardijn*. Great Britain: T. Snape.

Young Christian Workers (2007): *Effectiveness Report 2007, Education Content*. Young Christian Workers Ireland.

Internet Sources

Catholic News (2007): *See, judge, act: Latin American Bishops tell Pope*, [online] Available at: <http://www.cathnews.com/article.aspx?aeid=6057> [accessed Jan 21 2009]

Central Statistics Office: *Population by age 2006*, [online] Available at: <http://www.cso.ie/statistics/popnbyage2006.htm> [Accessed Feb 4 2009]

O'Mahony, E. (2008): *Religious Practice in Ireland, A summary of European Social Survey Round 3 data*. The Council for Research & Development. [online] Available at: http://www.catholicbishops.ie/images/stories/cco_publications/researchanddevelopment/ess%20round%203%20report%20-%20revised.pdf [Accessed Aug 2009]

National Youth Council of Ireland www.youth.ie

Young Christian Workers Ireland Life Survey www.ycw.ie

© 2009 - Young Christian Workers - Irish Branch

For more information, please contact:



Young Christian Workers
National Office
11 Talbot Street
Dublin 1
Ireland

Tel/Fax: 00+353 (0)1-878 0291

Email: info@ycw.ie
Website: www.ycw.ie