

# The Church and the Workers<sup>1</sup>

D. J. M. HEAP

TWO EXCELLENT SIGNS of our times are posted at the corner of St. Clair Avenue and Russell Hill Road in Toronto. One is blue and white, announcing: "The Anglican Church of Canada Welcomes You—Grace Church on the Hill—Two Blocks North." Above it is a big white arrow showing that Russell Hill Road is "one way"—south. So it seems to be with the Church and the industrial workers—they are going opposite ways.

Industrial workers generally do not come to Church. May we take that statement for a starting point? We could study the statistics, but the broad fact is beyond dispute. For decades Church leaders have asked how we can bring the industrial workers back to the Church. But in all fairness it does seem that there is a question we should ask first: namely, "*Why don't* the industrial workers come to Church?"

## WHO ARE THE WORKERS?

To begin with, who are the industrial workers? They are the wage-labourers, especially in our factories. A typical labour agreement between a manufacturing firm and a labour union has these words: "The bargaining unit shall consist of all permanent employees within the jurisdiction of the Union in the foregoing plant save and except any Foreman or Assistant Foreman having direct responsibility to the management for the operation of a department. . . ." In other words we can find the workers in a plant roughly by finding those who do not carry responsibility for the work of others. The operator of a machine may direct the helpers, but his main work is with machine and materials. On the other hand, a foreman's main or sole work is to direct others. This is the knife that cuts right through life in a factory. Some work, and others direct.

Lack of directing power shapes the outlook and character of industrial workers. By our labour we turn raw materials into finished products. No foreman or manager normally handles the product or touches the machine. We do it from start to finish. Yet the company, management, usually claim that "the company" makes the product, and without fail they claim that the company *owns* the product and has the sole right to sell it and take the profit. On what does the company base this claim? On the right of decision. The same typical labour agreement also has these words: "The Manage-

1. An address given at the Etobicoke Ministerial Religion-Labour Council Seminar, January 10, 1963. The author is a worker-priest.

ment of the plant and the direction of the working forces . . . is vested exclusively in the company. . . ." In other words we do the work, but the company does the thinking and deciding. Day after day, year after year, generation after generation, each worker comes to the factory to spend himself, his life, on the work—but not to use his own mind or judgment or feelings or will.

This is the bedrock fact of our times. The industrial worker is a man but is expected to act as little more than a machine. True, some jobs are more skilled than others. True, some companies pay their employees for new ideas about production methods. True, some workers take a loving pride in their work. Yet the crucial decisions—*what* we shall make, *who* will make it, *how* we shall make it, *when* we shall make it, *how fast* we shall make it, *how good* we shall make it, *how many* we shall make, or whether we shall *stop* making things—these crucial decisions are forever withheld from the workers, and reserved to management. Often the keenest worker is the one most bitterly balked and frustrated by his job. In order to eat, in order to live, we must more or less lay aside the finest parts of our life—our reason, our feelings, and our will. This habit of work can and does very much become a habit of life.

#### SO NEAR AND YET SO FAR

These are the people who stay away from Church. Of course, not all stay away. Here one comes, and there a couple, but the great crowds of industrial workers stay away from Church Sunday after Sunday.

No doubt they cannot stay very far away. Canada is a formally Christian country, and it is impossible to get very far from the Church. Most Canadians, even most industrial workers, were baptized by the Church as infants. Many also come to Church for marriage. Many come to a minister of the Church for burial. In time of war many are paraded to the Church in the armed forces. Every taxpayer makes an indirect donation to the Church through its various tax exemptions. Nearly all Canadians have received religious teaching in day-schools, and many workers even send their children to Sunday School. Many unemployed or distressed workers claim welfare help from the Church.

And yet, after all these contacts, most workers do not come to the regular services of worship in our churches. We of the Church in turn are perplexed, even frustrated, by the situation. After all, God came to mankind in Jesus so that we may come to him. He invites us to let him mend our ruined lives so that we may live now and forever as friends with each other and friends with him. Therefore we must come together often as a great family to meet him, and these regular meetings are the worship services of the Church. Surely the lives of the industrial workers are so damaged in their daily work that they should come too? Why do they not come?

## WE KEEP THEM OUT

One cannot answer finally and completely, for any man other than oneself, the question why a particular person does not come to Church. Nevertheless, I believe we must confess that we active churchgoers have set up stumbling blocks against the industrial workers coming to Church. Often unknowingly, we have done it, and we are responsible. We have done it not so much by individual decisions as by unconscious group habits.

Suppose the worker chooses to come to Church, to meet with other Christians before God. Nowadays that means he must enter a big building, a great pile of brick or stone. At present we give him no other way by which he can join in the public worship of God. These buildings cost money—a great deal of money. And generally speaking, in the Church now, as in the factory, he who pays the piper calls the tune. The policy of the Church is shaped mainly by those who give the most money. Those who have less, such as the industrial workers, have little voice in vital Church decisions. Some will argue that this arrangement is just, or at least practically sound. But who would claim that it encourages people with little money to come forward and feel at home in the Church?

Nevertheless, many workers do still come for baptism, marriage, and burial. And what do they find? A lively family of friends, people whose lives God is renewing, so that they may be his friends? Not usually—they find just the expensive building and a minister and other hired hands.

At Baptism the minister says these wonderful words: "We receive this Child into the Congregation of Christ's flock, and do sign him with the Sign of the Cross, in token that hereafter he shall not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified, and manfully to fight under his banner against sin, the world, and the devil, and to continue Christ's faithful soldier and servant unto his life's end. Amen." When he says, "We receive this Child into the Congregation of Christ's flock," the worker may look around and see a barnful of empty pews. This does not look like taking a new member into a living Vine, the Body of Christ. This looks like a mysterious private ritual that is supposed to certify him for Heaven or at least make him more respectable on earth.

At marriage the minister begins: "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of God, and in the face of this Congregation, to join together this man and this woman in holy Matrimony. . . ." Again, what congregation? Apart from the family and personal friends of the bride and groom, the congregation ignores the marriage. The whole family of Christ does *not* join in assisting man and woman in the making of their vows. Instead, so far as the couple can see, the Church is represented by some legal red tape, some sermonizing from a minister, and another mysterious ceremony that is supposed to make them live happily ever after.

At a burial, long ago, the Church would meet to worship God whenever

a Christian completed this life and went to eternity. We still read the glorious chapter from First Corinthians, which ends: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be yet steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord." Here the Church proclaims love, trust, freedom, joy, and the sure worth of all our daily work. But is the proclamation convincing? Once more, the regular worshipping congregation is not present. The mourners are alone. They see little evidence of the joy, trust, and freedom that belong to Christian burial. Only the minister, the caretaker, and maybe the organist are there. What is the ceremony for? Does it give a man a better chance of getting into Heaven? The worker "goes along" with the usual way of doing it, but we do not show him faith, hope, and love. How can we expect him to respond?

The worker not only lacks the chief form of social power in our country and in our Church, namely money, but he also lacks formal education. Until a century ago most workers could not read and write. The Church was then run by the educated, according as those with money paid the bill. Now the workers have all been to school—but the Church has leaped out of their reach again. We must now have fancy campaigns to raise money, with professional money-getters giving orders to clergy and elected officers alike; the slogan is "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also," but a mere ten per cent of your treasure is supposed to make God think he has your whole heart. We must have glossy religious education programmes, either rocketting along on a university intellectual level or sharing in the gimmicks of radio, television, spectacular movies, and the Public Relations business. Pensions and building funds are so complicated that no worker can speak about them. The worker is not trained in public speaking or advertising. Even if he can school himself to speak and act in the meeting of the local congregation, he finds out sooner or later that the big decisions are made not there, but downtown. How like the factory.

As for the regular services of prayer, Bible reading, hymns, and teaching, the worker usually stays away. The teaching sets the tone, and that tone discourages him. Generally the Church in her teaching for several generations past has sided with the rich against the poor, with the employers against the workers.

One can, it is true, find statements made by Church leaders years ago upholding the dignity of work and the rights of organized labour. Nevertheless, I have not heard this judgment proclaimed in the weekly teaching of the Church. Still less have I seen it shown in the daily actions of Christian businessmen or even Christian ministers.

What I have seen is a man, slightly built, scarred as a veteran, harried and driven by foremen from one heavy job to another, and told, "If you can't do it, we'll get someone who can." I have seen a keen young worker with a family laid off two weeks before Christmas. I have seen a young

father of a family start night-school classes and be forced to drop them because he was put on shift work. I have seen a man in his fifties sweating and straining because he was made to do a job that was too heavy for one man by factory engineering standards; and I have sent the Union's letter of condolence to his family when he died. Where was the gospel? What did the Church say? There was hatred, bitterness, distrust, robbery, and death. Could we appeal to the Church for judgment, for real help? Not likely. The Church may give a handout to a man or his family, especially if he has been seen attending services, but the Church rarely risks the ill-will of the rich and powerful. Accordingly, the Church has nothing to say about our work, that part of our life which chiefly shapes our character and our spirit. The teaching services of our Church either drive the workers away or leave them cold.

Consider at last the central act and experience of the Church's life, the Eucharist, the Holy Communion. Here we are to come most deliberately and heartily to give ourselves to God through the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. We hear the words from the Last Supper, "Take, eat, this is my Body which is given for you: Do this in remembrance of me." This act should be our most complete self-giving to God, giving him our whole life, our daily work, our thoughts, our feelings, our freedom and trust, giving ourselves along with all our Christian friends. But instead we are led to focus on these words:

The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for *thee*, preserve *thy* body and soul unto everlasting life: Take and eat this in *remembrance* that Christ died for *thee*, and feed on him *in thy heart* by faith with thanksgiving. The Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for *thee*, preserve *thy* body and soul unto everlasting life: Drink this in remembrance that Christ's Blood was shed for *thee*, and be *thankful*.

Jesus said, "My Body given for *you*," speaking to a body of friends. We change to "*thee*," speaking to each person privately. We emphasize further that this is a private, subjective action by words such as "in remembrance," "feed on him in thy heart," and "thankful." These words well represent the whole tendency of our forms of worship for generations past. We emphasize what happens in the mind and emotions of the lone individual. We seem more concerned with what men think and feel about God than with what God himself does. We pass lightly over the material acts of production which God requires that men do together, productive work on which men depend both to live and to pray.

How is it then with the worker who comes to Church? All week he has been told that his mind and emotions and will are no matter—all that counts is that he work with the others to make a product and feed his family. Even in the Church he is in practice shut out from responsibility, from decision, and from the fullest sharing of human company. Then in the central, chief act of worship he is expected to spring forward with an intense private devotion, a highly specialized act of mind and emotions, a

discipline for which he is quite unprepared. Usually it seems quite meaningless to him. Is there any wonder that he does not come?

### THEREFORE THEY STAY OUT

For generations the working man has been shut out of full personal responsibility in his daily work, and the Church has consented. For generations the working man has been brought to baptism, marriage, and burial passive, expected only to be there and listen. For generations the working man has been effectively left out of the government of his Church. For generations the working man has watched the Church enjoy the favour and generosity of the owners of wealth and employers of labour, with little knowledge of the life of the working man, let alone care for it. How can he respond? How can he protest? How can he match his actions with his deepest sense of right and wrong? There is still the central act of the Church, depending solely (so he is taught) on one's will and mind and emotions. He can boycott it. Boycott, strike, withholding of one's presence and participation, is the characteristic means of working-class action. It seems that the workers are boycotting the worship services of the Church.

### CONCLUSIONS

This paper began with the question: "Why don't the industrial workers come to Church?" I have offered an answer: our whole public life, especially our system of earning a living, has gravely hindered the workers from benefitting by the ministrations of the Church. I close with two suggestions.

On the one hand, I believe the Church can expect no early improvement in this condition. The trouble has grown for many generations and is very deep-seated. It arises from the structure of our society, and will not be easily cured. We shall not cure it by blaming either churchgoers or workers. We shall not cure it by pep-talks, either to those already converted or to those no longer listening. We shall not cure it by piecemeal reforms, such as modernizing the language of our services, building more functional churches, or setting up a special industrial mission, though these things may be worth doing. For awhile, we churchgoers must face disappointment, as the workers have done. We must wait for understanding to grow, our understanding of the workers and of ourselves.

On the other hand, I believe the industrial workers are not barred from living responsible lives. At the beginning of this paper I suggested that our economic system (including property and labour laws) bars them from *individual* responsibility in their work. However, the workers have answered by showing *corporate* responsibility through labour unions. The labour movement is far from perfect and may now in Canada be entering serious crisis. Nevertheless, men and women still give time, work, and loyalty to it, risk unemployment, physical injury, bad public relations, and other real

hardships for it. We do it not chiefly for higher wages and shorter hours but so that we can win some control over our own lives. This is a humane and godly goal. The Church as a whole has never seriously examined it. Let the Church use this time of waiting to look carefully at the factory and the labour movement and ask: "What is *God* now doing in modern industry?"