

Joseph Cardijn

Joseph Cardijn is the heart and soul of an approach to the spiritual life that became the International Movement of Christian Family Movements. He was responsible for a new awareness in the Church of the ministry of the laity and an appreciation of the power of the laity to bear Christ's message to the world. Some see his hand behind the development of liberation theology and the *comunidades eclesiales de base* that have been so effective in the church of South America.

The basis of these claims is a method he devised to help anyone discover what was necessary for Christian Action called "Review of Life." Its key hallmarks are the principles of ICCFM: Observe, Judge, Act. While there are variations in the way groups affiliated with ICCFM function, all member nations of ICCFM use this method in their programs.

Cardijn developed this practical tool working with young people in Belgium between 1912 and 1935.

It led to the creation of the Young Christian Workers, Young Christian Students, the Christian Family Movement., and the International Confederation of Christian Family Movements.

Movements using Observe, Judge, and Act exist on every continent.

Cardijn said, "For me, laymen are not formed ...through books, purely theoretical teaching or spoken lectures however magnificent, or even through discussions, ... Laymen are formed first of all by the discovery of facts, followed by a Christian judgement, resulting in the actions they plan, the plans they carry into effect, the responsibilities they shoulder."

Cardijn believed that the Christian vocation was lived out in the ordinary day-to-day life. "The personal well-being of (anyone) depends on these ordinary actions of his everyday life. Whether he is happy or not depends on whether he understands the value of his daily actions.... (An individual's) role is not only human it is also divine. Each one takes the place of God; he is the image of God; he is an agent or representative of God. If he will not carry out the mission that has been entrusted to him, Almighty God does not do it in his place."

Cardijn was born a few years before Pope Leo XIII issued *Rerum Novarum*. This groundbreaking encyclical is the foundation for the Church social teaching. *Rerum Novarum* was the Church's first clear statement that workers had a right to a just wages, decent work and safe working conditions. Workers, Leo XII said, were more important than capital. The document made a clear connection between religious principles and social conditions. It said that workers did not have to look to socialism to find relief from their distress. The teachings of Jesus support their right to be treated with dignity and respect.

Joseph was from the working class. He would have gone to work at 12 but for his parents allowing him to continue his studies so that he could become a priest. They supported his vocation though it was a hardship to the family.

After he went to the seminary life, changed for Cardijn. His friends from home looked upon him differently because they viewed the Church as indifferent to their problems. The actions of local priests and parishes had convinced these young people that the Church was more interested in the rich and powerful than the meek of this world. *Rerum Novarum* had not made any difference to them. They did not see any changes.

Cardijn saw his friends harden to life, wanting nothing to do with him or the Church. He found a vocation to work to overcome the alienation he saw in young people.

Cardijn wanted them to see that he was concerned about their daily life as much as he cared about their spiritual life. Cardijn saw no separation between ordinary life and religious life.

Cardijn's understanding that life had a unity about it was a hallmark of theology in the later half of

the 20th century. It is especially evident in the thinking of Karl Rahner, but few others understood this at the time Cardijn espoused this notion.

During his seminary years Cardijn was influenced by Marc Sagnier. Marc Sagnier led an organization called the *Sillon* (The Furrow), a lay organization that was trying to foster a change in society. The *Sillon* existed for only 12 years before it was asked to disband. The Church hierarchy felt it was too powerful for a lay run organization and asked Sagnier to dissolve it. In great humility, Sagnier did as he was asked. Cardijn learned the lesson to work within Church structures from this incident.

When he was assigned to the parish of Laeken in Brussels, he began working with a group of about 30 young women who were factory workers and there he began implementing some of his ideas, following a pattern he continued the rest of his life. He organized the girls into a group to study the conditions they worked under and help them protect their rights. He took his guidance in working with the young women from Victoire Cappe

Cappe had also been influenced by the *Sillon*. One contribution of Cappe is that she worked with the development of action on the personal level. The *Sillonists* (who were predominantly male) were more concerned about ideas and large scale action.

Cardijn also developed a following of young men in Laeken Three were particularly important. Fernand Tonnet, Paul Garcet, and Jacques Meert. These three continued to employ the principles of Observe, Judge, Act until the end of their lives.

Cardijn consistently taught that the Christian serves God best by living a life of integrity. He wrote "For an immense number of Christians, religion is only a private affair, something apart from their daily work. It should be its spirit, its motive power, its transformer, its supernaturalizer."

"Religion is the whole of life which, like the host, should be consecrated to God."

Cardijn's principles caused him to act in ways that were sometimes dangerous. He had maintained an observation post in a house near the railway station; and reported the movement of German munitions trains to the Allies. He was arrested for spying, a capital offense, and was held for a year without trial.

Cardijn wrote the basic manual of the Young Christian Worker movement during this imprisonment. He led his study circles from prison by smuggling out inquiry questions and articles by means of his laundress. His articles, written from prison, were the basis of the first manual of the Young Christian Workers.

By some miracle, Cardijn was released without ever being brought to trial and resumed his work.

He continued to remind people of how laymen and women progress in the Christian life.

"It is (laymen and women) themselves who work at their proper formation and little by little come to take the initiative in the practice of responsibility, devotion, generosity, and brotherly cooperation...."

"Thus they develop together a concrete professional conscience in discussing together the day-by-day conditions of their work and their lives. They prepare themselves for their future family and civic responsibilities by a loyal study of Catholic moral teaching..."

Cardijn was convinced that private devotions were not enough for the Christian layman. Faith must be put into action.

When study circles failed Cardijn reminded people that "Faith without works is dead. The study circle is not just a teaching business. It communicates a faith, a faith enthusiastic for social, moral and religious action and organization."

In about 1935 Cardijn delivered an address to a congress of YCW members. In it he appears to have first stated the Observe (or See), Judge, Act formula

This movement is about "Leaders and members learning to see, to judge and to act: to SEE the problem of their temporal and eternal destiny; to JUDGE the present situation, the problems, the contradictions, and the eternal destiny; to ACT in view of the conquest of that temporal and eternal destiny. To ACT individually and together as a team, in the local section, in the regional federation, in a national movement, in meetings, through practical accomplishment, both in individual lives and within the whole milieu, thus forming a single front going forward to conquer on behalf of the workers, their brothers."

That last part is important. It's something we probably don't emphasize enough. Cardijn wanted to change the world for Christ. Cardijn constantly stressed the missionary quality of his movement. "We have to win over the whole life of young workers, in their families, their work, their sentiments, so that it all becomes a means of collaboration with God."

We can see how Cardijn and his closest followers lived this in their own lives. During WWII Cardijn was arrested again for protesting the deportation of workers to German war factories. Tonnet and Garcet were arrested for their collaboration with the Allies and died in a concentration camp. YCW went underground during the war but it persisted. Jacques Meert survived to carry on the work of the movement and died August 3, 2001 at the age of 99.

Cardijn visited the United States, Canada and Mexico, Central and South America in 1947 spreading his message. By the late fifties YCW was established in 30 to 40 American cities. Cardijn traveled the world forming YCW communities and speaking to gatherings of the faithful. Youth that were formed in YCW became leaders in their communities. CFM was formed about this same time.

Cardijn's work really showed the potential of lay spirituality. Lay people can change the world by being in places where the Church's ministers cannot be. Lay people can change the world by living as Christians in the world.

"It is not your business to imitate priests and religious. You are lay people, young workers, engaged couples, tomorrow (you will be) fathers, wives, mothers....You have to work, but you also have to learn a spirituality in which one's work becomes one's prayer

"....There is no religion on the side of life--no prayer on one side of life. Such prayer, such religion would be false. Prayer and religion must transform life and make life divine, relink the lives of men to the life of God."

In his later years, Cardijn was celebrated. He was awarded several doctorates especially in North America, but also by Louvain in his native Belgium. Shortly before he died Cardijn was made a Cardinal of the Church. He was able to attend the last session of the second Vatican Council.

Cardijn influenced the Universal Church. His understanding of the role of the laity in the Church had been incorporated into the work of the Vatican Council especially the document on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*.

Romeo Maione who was leader of the International YCW in the fifties says "At a recent church meeting, I was told by a bishop that "the YCW, the YCS, and the CFM, all the Cardijn movements had served the church well. In fact, it was their idea, experiences and witness that were at the center of the last council. We salute you. You were the instruments that renewed the church. You have done your job."

"It was, to be sure an incredible compliment which I could not really accept because I thought that all the time I was in the YCW, I was renewing the world. In fact, it is only in renewing the world that the church will be really renewed."

Cardijn who was dedicated to changing the world through inspiring lay men and women to find and live their true Christian vocation, would second that sentiment and urge us to renew our commitment to it.

CARDIJN, Joseph-Leon (1882-1967)

Childhood: Born November 16, 1882, Hal, Belgium
Third child of five born to Henry Cardijn and Louise Van Daele.
Father's occupation: coal merchant
Mother's occupation: domestic servant

Priesthood: Ordained September 22, 1906, Mechlin
Faculty member - Seminary of Basse-Wabre
Pastoral work, Mechlin, 1912
Imprisoned during WWI, 1915-1917
Ministry, Mechlin workers, 1917-1925
Founder, Young Christian Workers, 1925

YCW General Chaplain - 1927-1965
Imprisoned during WWII - 1941

Episcopate: February 15, 1965
Elected titular archbishop of Tusuro
February 21, 1965
Consecrated Archbishop
by Cardinal Leo-Joseph Suenens,
Archbishop of Mechlin-Brussels

Cardinalate: February 22, 1965, Created cardinal deacon
February 25, 1965,
Received red biretta and deaconry
at San Michele Arcangelo a Pietralata

Death: July 25, 1967, Louvain
Buried: Parish of Notre Dame of Laeken, Brussels