AN OPEN LETTER TO "PENGUIN"

On Jocism and Industrialism

Dear "Penguin,"

Pius XI has proclaimed that the Jeunesse Ouvrière Chretienne is "la forme genuine de l'Action catholique." But that is no reason why we should refuse to face the problems aroused by its aims, its programmes, its methods, its application of principles. Indeed it is precisely the job of a theologian—in the broad sense of the word—to state and attempt to solve these problems. Among such problems, he will be particularly interested in those which arise as the outcome of the adaptation of such a movement of Young Christian Workers to the conditions and "atmosphere" of a country quite different from those which prevail in the countries which gave it birth. Hence we have been following with great interest the discussion which has been carried on during the past few months in Blackfriars and other English periodicals with regard to the position of the J.O.C. (or of any analogous organisation of Young Christian Workers) with respect to "industrialism."

First of all, a point of *fact*. Let us get rid once and for all of this insinuation, even though indirect, that the J.O.C. is "developing a strong immolationist tendency," and that it fosters the idea that its members "should accept, in the way of perfection, the sub-human conditions of advanced Industrialism by way of martyrdom for the common good." I should like to see some of our honest and ingenuous young Jocist militants hear this reproach: they could answer with nothing but a grand and healthy burst of laughter, like that of a man full of health and vigour who is told by his doctor that he suspects him of some strange and sinister disease. Believe me, the J.O.C. is in far too good health to be able to give way to this strange immolationist pseudo-mysticism. So please do not expect that the J.O.C. is going to make a solemn public declaration to repudiate this alleged tendency.

A real Jocist simply will not understand what gibberish you are talking.

But there is another problem besides that of fact, and that is the more serious *doctrinal* problem: the problem with which present conditions of labour confront the Christian worker.

Now, a certain doctrine of work, a certain *mystique* of work, is one of the most fundamental characteristics of the J.O.C. A Jocist believes that work is something which *can be and must be made holy,* and that not merely by some extrinsic and adventitious pious intention, but by an "incarnation" of divine grace in the rich material of human nature. The man who labours is seen to be the collaborator of God in His work of creation. "When I am slack at my work, I waste the time of the good God," said a young Jocist recently. This quite spontaneous remark showed a profundity of Christian understanding worth as much or more than the most subtle theories of the theologians.

But, it will be asked, what is the relevance of all this fervour, this mystical faith in the Christian doctrine of work, to *actual* conditions? What application can this have to that kind of work which industrialism has rendered radically and incurably inhuman? Machine-production annihilates the human personality of the worker; it is futile to try to sanctify it—we must destroy it altogether.

An analogy from history (and Church history often affords an excellent *locus theologicus*) should enable us to suspect that there is something wrong in this uncompromising and comprehensive rejection of machine-production. There once existed—and it is to be noted that this was in Christendom itself and was itself the product of Christian civilization—a condition of labour that was by no means calculated to favour the full development of human personality, and which in fact came at length positively to degrade the human dignity of labour; we mean the condition of serfdom. In its beginnings and in principle it was a just and indeed a magnificent idea: the serf would make an oath of fidelity

and service to his lord, in return for which he would receive his fatherly protection from all manner of the perils that beset him. This oath was, as it were, the sacramental of this social status and indeed the link which bound together the human community. Yet it was soon to become obsolete, and indeed to prove a deadweight on the evolution of human society, an obstacle which hindered the legitimate demands of new generations for emancipation in a society which was rapidly changing by reason of the rise of larger-scale commerce and of communal industry under the guild-system. But did the Church thereupon straightway condemn the system of serfdom? No. She preached a doctrine which would dispose men spiritually to free themselves from the inhuman elements in serfdom, from those elements which were or had become incapable of sanctification. Similarly in the twentieth century, Catholic Action has not made it its *proper* and *immediate* aim (as you, my dear Penguin, have already rightly pointed out) to destroy the status of industrial proletarianism, but precisely to foster those spiritual conditions which will free men from those evils which it involves and which, being evil, are likewise incapable of sanctification.

But, what is to be understood by this word "industrialism"? It comprises two things: (1) machine-production, and (2) that collective character of labour conditions in which the individual is dragooned for the purposes of mass production. It is these two distinctive elements which characterise the life of the industrial workers in our age.

The problem which confronts us is therefore this: Do these two factors *necessarily* imply an essential degradation of man, in such wise that they cannot be sanctified or impregnated with Christian values? Do they imply a situation which of its nature must ever remain impervious to the grace of God and to integration within the mystical Body of Christ?

No. The machine of its nature is neither good nor bad. It is an instrument of man, and it is the use which men make of it that renders it good or bad. It is not to be denied that

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this question as to *how* the machine is to be used arouses a host of very serious and difficult problems, but we shall not resolve these problems by attributing responsibility to *things* instead of to *persons*. It is not the machine which is responsible for its misdeeds; it is the régime of liberal capitalism which makes of the machine an *instrument* of exploitation—of the exploitation of man *by man*. And the J.O.C. does not fail to join vociferously with the voice of the Church in condemning *that*.

The machine can indeed be an instrument for the oppression of man; but it can also be an instrument for his liberation. That, we would maintain, is its purpose under providence, and it is that that a *Christian* use of the machine would make a reality. Is not the engineer in the engine-room of the *Queen Mary* at least as "free"—from the human and Christian standpoint—as the galley-slave chained to his oars in the time of Elizabeth? Is the operation which controls the flow of petrol more "dehumanising" than that of the wretched stoker who must continually shovel coal into the furnace? Is less intelligence, skill or responsibility demanded to steer a bus through the traffic-crowded street of a modern city, or a lorry along an arterial road, or to land an aeroplane, than to lead a mule-cart along a primitive track?

We have seen that the second characteristic of modern industrial labour is the absorption of the individual in the collective rhythm which deprives him of all initiative and depersonalises his work. The artisan with his craft was a *man;* the modern worker in the factory is no longer a man but a "hand."

But we must make the same reply. The "socialisation" of work is not inherently perverse; it does not of its nature involve that "alienation" which Marx rightly denounced in the inhuman economy of the nineteenth century. Man is by nature a social being; every good that he can attain he can normally attain solely in and by society. It is in and by society that he will find any real values; in and by society that he will normally conquer them, make them spread and

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multiply, and enhance the resources at his disposal. This is true even of spiritual values. Even of the supreme value of the grace of God, which is given to us in and by the mystical Body of Christ.

And so also it must be in the matter of work, combining as it does the material and the spiritual. Collective work can indeed involve a terrible restraint and self-repression; but this danger which lurks in it is but the concomitant of that wonderful power whereby man increases and multiplies his resources. The J.O.C. sets out to seek and discover the means of overcoming this danger, and to dominate that power for the good of man. For it knows that every collective régime, at all its stages and in all the elements that comprise it, is made to subserve the autonomous vocation of *persons*.

It may indeed be opportune and profitable to create new communities spiritually and economically independent of modern society. But on no account may we neglect the task of transforming that society itself in its inmost structure. Only *sin* is impervious to grace, is incapable of integration within the Kingdom of God.

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EXTRACTS AND COMMENTS

COMMON PRAYER. Those of us to whom the liturgical movement is a matter of taste—a luxury of the Christian life—will not easily understand the intense seriousness with which it is regarded and the immense importance which is attributed to it by our fellow-Catholics in Germany. "To labour for an 'Order of Common Prayer' . . . is one of the most urgent duties that the service of God imposes upon us in our time . . . The destiny of the Church in our fatherland will in large measure depend on the response she gives to the problem of the liturgy . . . " Such characteristic phrases (from an article, *Liturgie in der Gemeinde,* in the current SCHILDGENOSSEN) may still seem practically unintelligible in this country, and the more astonishing coming from a

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