

Léon Harmel: Entrepreneur as Catholic Social Reformer. *By Joan L. Coffey.* Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003. x + 340 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$48.00. ISBN: 0-268-03360-9.

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By altering the entire context of economic conditions, the Industrial Revolution generated the “Social Question.” Artisans, skilled workers organized in guilds, and peasants, skilled in their own fashion at working the land, became less skilled, more often unskilled, machine tenders. The close, sometimes paternalistic, relationship of master craftsman to his journeymen, of landlord to his tenants, became the distant, usually antagonistic relationship of capitalist factory owner to the proletariat. Various answers to the Social Question came from “socialists,” Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, Louis Blanc, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and Karl Marx. The answer from the Catholic Church to the Social Question was Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), which condemned both capitalism and socialism, offering instead a “Christian corporatism.”

The single best example of such a Christian corporation was at the Val-des-Bois (French Ardennes) textile mill of Léon Harmel (1829–1915). Ambitious, inventive, diligent, Harmel was the epitome of an early-nineteenth-century entrepreneurial capitalist; he was also a fervent Catholic with a highly developed social conscience. At Val-des-Bois, he created a “community of interests” among bosses and workers, a “reign of justice and charity” for the “prosperity of the enterprise” (p. 103). In practice, the institution of this Christian corporation required three steps. First, to overcome the widespread de-Christianization among the workers, he built a chapel at the factory and encouraged them to join lay religious associations. Second, to be “just,” he paid a “family wage” proportionate to the number of children, provided a savings bank and a mutual-aid society, and imposed work hours that were shorter and work rules that were safer than the law required. Third, he established a *syndicat professionnel* (professional union) that included everyone at the factory, both labor and management, “not to settle disputes but to prevent them” (p. 93). Workers uncomfortable in this environment of religion and paternalism usually departed, but for those who remained, this extraordinary

degree of involvement and responsibility stimulated high morale, high productivity, and high profits.

The system at Val-des-Bois attracted attention even from rivals, famously including the independent socialist René Viviani, who would become prime minister of France in 1914 as World War I began and who a year earlier said of Harmel, “A simple visionary; but if all the owners acted as he did, the Social Problem would become insignificant” (p. 101). More than two decades earlier, Leo XIII had dared hope that the “Harmel method” could spread across France and the rest of Europe as a competitor to Marxist socialism. During the years immediately before and after *Rerum Novarum*, Harmel was a frequent and honored visitor to the Vatican. Briefly, he gained unwanted international publicity when the worker pilgrimages he led to Rome threatened to embroil diplomatic relations between France and the Italian government, which was then feuding with the papacy.

To prepare this study of Harmel and his work, Joan L. Coffey consulted material from French national and provincial archives and from previously inaccessible records at the Vatican Library. In her hands, Harmel emerges as the kindly *Bon Père* (Good Father) of Val-des-Bois, a man ahead of his time and the very emblem of the Catholic Church’s answer to the Social Question. But, of course, this program never attracted many followers. Harmel himself was devoted to a world of faith and hierarchy that had largely disappeared. He was openly anti-Semitic, a point Coffey mutes, and the Catholic establishment was on the wrong side of the Dreyfus Affair. His views had little appeal to a society that was increasingly secular, individualistic, and rightly mistrustful of authority. Even before World War I, corporatism implied a sacrifice of freedom, and afterward, the implication became inescapable in the practice of fascism. Harmel was forgotten. Coffey has rescued him from oblivion, but he should be remembered as a quaint failure.

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