

THE CHURCH AND WORKINGMEN.*

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Jesus Christ—I speak it with reverence—was a workingman; his kingdom was founded among workingmen; his first ministers were workingmen; a large part of the world's population are workingmen. If, therefore, the Church is in any measure identical with the kingdom which Christ came to establish, and desires to be true to its origin and divine ideal, there should be everything in the Church to attract the world's toilers, and nothing to repel them. But is this the case?

Are workingmen attracted to the Church in the present day as they were to Jesus Christ when "the common people heard him gladly"? The most pronounced optimist will scarcely venture to affirm that they are. At the same time I cannot bring myself into sympathy with extremists who declare that there is a mighty chasm between the Church and workingmen that never can be bridged over. The statement has a measure of truth when applied to the unchurched masses of the old world, and to considerable numbers in the great centres of population on this continent; but it is an utter exaggeration when applied to the working population as a whole. But although there is as yet no broad chasm, there is a narrow rift, and unless timely steps are taken this may widen until it becomes a "great gulf fixed," too deep to be fathomed and too wide to be crossed. It will be far easier to close the rift now than to bridge the chasm fifty years hence.

The Church and the workingmen ought to be firm friends and

allies. Alienation of confidence and sympathy, leading to antagonism, would be an unspeakable calamity to both. The workingmen have need of the Church, and the Church has need of the workingmen. Rather let me say, the workingmen should be the Church. It was theirs at the first; and if they have suffered it to slip out of their hands, the duty of the hour is to claim back their inheritance and insist that the Church shall be what Jesus intended it to be—bread for the hungry, clothing for the naked, protection for the friendless, a refuge for the oppressed; above all, that it should be the one place where arbitrary social distinctions shall disappear, and where, on the foundation of a common brotherhood, rich and poor shall meet together, acknowledging that God is the Maker and Father of them all.

I do not think that any real antagonism exists between the Church and the workingmen as such, but only with that class (a small one, I hope) of sceptical and irreligious men who antagonize all religion, or that other class who make the assumed delinquencies of the Church an excuse for the habitual neglect of religion. The fact that in every Christian congregation workingmen are to be found, sometimes constituting the bulk of the membership, is proof positive that there is no insuperable barrier between the two. Multitudes of workingmen have found in the Church a congenial spiritual home, and are not slow to acknowledge the benefits derived from the association. At the same time there are vast numbers of working people, neither sceptical nor irreligious in any strong sense

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