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Blast From the Past: James Cardinal Gibbons

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 5, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

When labor unions were first organized, they needed to remain secretive because the leading industrialists were intent on destroying them in their crib. The Church had a long dread of secret societies stemming from the role of the Free Masons and other European groups that peddled in anti-clericalism. This concern of the Church almost resulted in a catastrophe for the Church?s ability to maintain the allegiance of the working classes, and to defend its emerging social doctrine as the following episode, record in Msgr. John Tracy Ellis?s ?American Catholicism? relates.

?The most famous case of the Church and a suspect American society involved the Knights of Labor, the first major American labor organization. In its early years as a highly secret society, it had aroused the suspicion of a number of bishops who wished to have it condemned. Fortunately, the counsels of these prelates did not prevail, for at the head of the hierarchy at that moment there stood probably the greatest single figure the Church in the United States has produced, James Cardinal Gibbons. It was the foresight and wisdom of Gibbons, expressed in a remarkable document which he submitted to the Holy See in February, 1887, that convinced the Roman officials that it would be a fatal mistake to condemn the Knights of Labor, who were, as the cardinal said, merely seeking redress of just grievances from capitalists whose power and wealth had subjected them to abuses which only their united strength could remedy. Having previously been shown the constitution and bylaws by Terence V. Powderly, the Grand Master Workman, Gibbons knew whereof he spoke when he insisted that the Knights were in no way inimical to the interests of either Church or State. He contrasted the alienation of the masses from religion in other countries with the respect which it enjoyed among American workingmen, among whom, he remarked, there existed ?not a democracy of license and violence, but that true democracy which aims at the general prosperity through the means of sound principles and good social order.? The cardinal emphasized the numerous proletarians who composed so large a part of the American Church and what such a condemnation would mean to them. There was no doubt about where he thought the Church?s sympathies should lie, for he told Giovanni Cardinal Simeoni, Prefect of the Congregation de Propaganda Fide, ?To lose the heart of the people would be a misfortune for which the friendship of the few rich and powerful would be no compensation.??

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