From Fear & Control to Freedom & Hope
Comparing two modes of action within the Catholic Church: Cardijn and Santamaria
By Kevin Peoples

Two modes of action practiced within the Catholic Church around the middle of the last century might start you thinking about this theme. The two modes feature prominently in my book, *Santamaria’s Salesman*.

This was a time when the Church was sponsoring an ambiguous and flawed concept called *Catholic Action*. The two modes found expression in the organizations developed by Joseph Cardijn (1882-1967) and B.A. Santamaria (1915-1998).

Cardijn

Cardijn founded an international organisation called the Young Christian Workers Movement (YCW). He formed his first group exactly one hundred years ago in a working-class suburb of Brussels, Belgium.

Cardijn was working-class. His family was uneducated and poor. When his father died, Cardijn dedicated his priesthood to his social class. Within one year as a curate, Cardijn knew not just the names and addresses of the young workers in his parish, but where they worked and what their problems were.

He met them outside the factory gates as they left work. He had charisma. He knew what to say. He offered them cigarettes. Then he asked: “What’s it like in there? How did you get the job? Are there prospects?”

Cardijn had one big idea which burnt within him - but he had to be careful how he introduced it. Anti-clericalism was rife in the working class.

This big idea was this: the *contradiction* between the dignity of each young worker as a child of God with a sacred mission in the world and the *corruption* of that idea through the demeaning labouring conditions in the local factories.

Cardijn believed that young workers had been called by God to live out their sacred mission in their world. That meant becoming activists. Their mission was to improve the conditions of all young workers, many of whom were as young as 12 years of age. That meant becoming involved in work issues, in speaking out and representing young workers.
But young factory workers had no history or tradition in such action. They had no skills, no training. They were already deeply humiliated by their experiences. The gap between Cardijn’s perception of their capabilities and their self-perceptions were of chasmic proportions.

Cardijn’s work with the young terrified the local Church, pious Catholics, and employers. They branded him a communist. Communism never disturbed Cardijn. He wrote that Catholic commentators ignored the central fact about Marx and communism: they had given a mission to the working class.

As a young priest, Cardijn inspected factories and workplaces all over Europe. They resembled modern-day workplaces in the poorest of our developing nations. He was shocked by what he found. He met trade union leaders in London. From them he learnt that ‘workers must be the saviours of workers.’

That idea became central to his thinking. It meant empowering his young workers. But work could not be isolated from the whole of their lives – their families, their friends, their leisure hours. Cardijn was interested in the whole person. He treated each of them with the greatest respect. And he placed great demands on them.

Cardijn’s ideas were to capture and enthral youth around the world. He lifted them up from their lowly positions in the workplace. He told them they were not just important, but irreplaceable. Whatever their religion, their colour, their gender, their qualifications, each possessed a God-given value.

There were no Catholics or non-Catholics, Christians or non-Christians. They all came from the same God. All had a divine mission and a divine destiny.

Cardijn’s God was a very big God. Bigger than Catholicism. He did not start with God talk. He knew the young had turned their backs on an uncaring Church.

It was pointless to tell them that the Church loved them. That God loved them. Where was God when they were humiliated and assaulted? When they were forced to work fifty and sixty hours a week without a care for their health and safety?

So Cardijn began with the worker problem. This was not about bringing young workers back to the church and the sacraments. His immediate aim was to make them aware of their special dignity and mission and of their responsibility to their fellow workers.

But, from the start, he introduced them to the person of Christ. He told them they were the new Christs. They prayed together in personal ways they understood. They prayed about their lives and their work and their friends. And they prayed for courage.

So what was this man doing that was different? It was this. Cardijn was linking the secular and the sacred. Christ, it seemed, worked in the factory.

Bob Santamaria

How did Bob Santamaria begin?

Bob was a brilliant student at school and University. Like Cardijn, he came from humble beginnings. Santamaria’s ancestors were peasants. His parents had come from the Aeolian Islands near Sicily. They worked hard to set up a greengrocers store in Brunswick. They valued education – an education that they themselves had not experienced.

But he made a name for himself as a debater at the University of Melbourne. He was an orator at a very young age, with a great gift of thinking quickly on his feet and of involving his audience with his passion.

He loved his Church and if possible wanted to work for it. He joined the Campion Society, a group of older Catholic
intellectuals at the University of Melbourne. He was impatient, restless, bursting with energy. He could see what had to be done, and couldn’t understand why the older men didn’t act. He wanted the Campions to start a newspaper. While they hesitated, he couldn’t wait. He went directly to Archbishop Daniel Mannix in 1936 and asked for permission. So began the Catholic Worker.

He wrote virtually all the first edition himself and sent a copy to Hilaire Belloc. His main theme summed up the way he thought. This is what he wrote: “It’s a fight. But we have been fighting for two thousand years. Victory has always been ours. It will be ours again, for our leader is Christ the King, our standard is the Cross.”

Bob was at war with society, and saw the world as a battlefield. The Church was under threat; everywhere he looked he saw a persecuted Church. He was engaged in a battle between good and evil.

Think of Cardijn here. Can you see a difference? Santamaria’s stance to his world was inevitably polemical. According to Karen Armstrong’s definition of a fundamentalist, Bob was well on the way to becoming one.

Bob was a propagandist, a man of rhetoric. He wanted to influence others and change society. He appealed to minds, and cast his net wide.

Bob’s first impulse was to start a newspaper and engage the enemy. All his adult life he was to have a newspaper - and an enemy. At 73, he began a new journal, AD 2000.

He enjoyed centre stage. In 1937, he had brought a majority of the audience at the University of Melbourne to their feet as they joined with him in the ringing cry of ‘Long Live Christ the King’, at the end of a debate on the Spanish Civil War.

He was a Christian warrior, a warrior for his Church. He was sure of himself, sure of his ideas, sure of his belief in the Catholic Church, the one true Church. He was thrilled with the two papal encyclicals, Rerum Novarum (1891) and Quadragesimo Anno (1931). He believed in social justice and thought the Church’s social teachings had the answers to the world’s problems.

For him it came down to power, of gaining power on behalf of his Church in social, economic and political organisations. He called on Catholics to leave their ghettos and become militant. He never saw the irony in this. His whole working life was spent within that ghetto.

Catholics, he argued, needed to engage in a political struggle. The Church had to fight back, to engage with the enemy. There was always an enemy. In 1940 it was paganism. Later it would be communism. Later still it would be Liberals in the Church.

Cardijn

Cardijn was nine when Rerum Novarum was published. He too was thrilled. He understood that the pope was sympathetic to the workers. The pope had endorsed the right of working men to form unions, and recognised the problems that workers experienced in the factories.

The young Cardijn read the encyclical to his father who could not read.

Santamaria

Santamaria was critical of Capitalism, which he considered yet another enemy. Like the Campions, he thought that the Great Depression (1929-1932) had virtually destroyed Capitalism.

Like the Campions, he saw an opportunity for the Church’s social teaching. His aim was expansive – to replace paganism with Christianity, by which he meant Catholicism.

The Catholic weekly newspaper in Melbourne, The Advocate, was critical of the first edition of the Catholic Worker, which it thought was too radical.

The Campions wanted to establish a national body of Catholic Action. Mannix wanted the young Santamaria. When Catholic Action began officially in 1937, Bob became its Assistant Director, at the age of 22.
He would Christianise Australia, and he would begin with the National Catholic Rural Movement; this would create a great agrarian civilisation based on the Church’s teachings.

**Cardijn**

Cardijn started his movement with a small group of leaders whom he trained. He then formed small groups, separating girls and boys, and he developed his mode of action through his “See, Judge, Act” model, or the Enquiry method.

This method was revolutionary inside an authoritarian Church. It placed power of the organisation in the hands of the young workers.

Cardijn would not do the enquiries. The Church would not do the enquiries. The intellectuals would not do the enquiries. The young workers would do the enquiries. They would see what the situation was in their workplaces. When they had the facts, they would cast a *judgement* on those facts.

Their measuring stick would be the love practised by Jesus in the gospels, along with the Church’s social teachings, which they studied, listening to their chaplains and their peers, and their own natural instincts on what they judged to be fair and just. In the end, they made the judgements.

Only when their judgements were set against the facts would the contradictions become clear – the contradiction between the real and the ideal – the truth of experience. Only then would they be moved to act.

Cardijn was convinced young workers must be self-motivated. Cardijn’s enquiry method grounded action in this world. The enquiry method was his second injection of the sacred into the secular.

Action may have been built on individuals, but it was focused around campaigns and coordinated by the whole movement. Cardijn’s role was to encourage and support his members, and remind them of their dignity, their vocation, and their irreplaceable responsibility. Behind the scenes, he was a brilliant organiser, a brilliant promoter. Like Santamaria, he had passion.

Cardijn’s movement worked from the bottom up, a movement of young workers, for young workers and by young workers. He called this whole process formation – formation in life.

**Santamaria**

How did the young Santamaria go about setting up his rural movement?

He studied the problems facing the farming community in Australia. In 1939, he read all he could, and wrote a report for his Director, describing the problems and providing the solutions. He did all this from his office in Collins Street without consulting a farmer.

This was a movement that worked from the top down. He came up with a set of policies, which were to be implemented by his members. The most important policy was the ‘independent farm’. Farmers must become self sufficient. Overseas trade had only brought them debt, he declared. They must change their farming methods. Farmers should diversify and ditch the specialised or one-crop model of farming.

The young man who had never grown a cabbage was telling his members how to farm. He told them that cooperatives and credit unions would replace the banks, and that farming was a vocation, not a commercial exercise.

Farmers, he said, were close to nature, close to God. Their vocation led them to practice their religion – at rates higher than their urban cousins. They had more children than those in the cities, and Australia needed to increase its numbers. Big cities were a threat to the faith and the future of the nation. He wanted to settle people on the land where they too would be close to God.

Like Cardijn, he set up small groups based on the parish, each with a chaplain. Members had to move out of their parishes and influence all the farmers in their neighbourhood to take up independent farming and set up cooperatives.
There was an urgency about the whole enterprise. He wanted groups formed throughout Australia. The rural bishops supported him. In a short time, he had groups in most states of the Commonwealth.

On the surface, it was impressive. But members were confused. The clergy were confused. The Rural Movement was a conceptual muddle. Neither the chaplains nor the members were sure what to do. Few knew what Catholic Action was. The bishops didn’t know.

Bob didn’t start with the farmers. He didn’t let them identify the problems in their areas. He knew what was wrong, and he had the answers. What mattered was the task. But what was the task?

After an initial interest in Cardijn’s enquiry method, he dropped it. It was too slow, too ineffective, suitable for young people but not adults. It gave too much freedom to individuals. What was required was a highly disciplined and coordinated body of men.

He rarely acknowledged the role played by rural movement women. He wanted to mobilise a single force of Catholics who owed their loyalty to him and who would act politically in unison.

The Rural Movement soon became a movement of social action, a Catholic country lobby group with a set of policies.

Bob felt hamstrung by the limitations of Catholic Action, which forbade party political action. By 1947, he wanted his members to permeate rural organisations. He called this the apostolate of institutions. The members’ allegiance in these secular organisations was not to the organisations they joined, such as the CWA or the various Farmers Associations, but to the Rural Movement. They were outsiders pretending to be insiders.

After one year, he was telling those who failed to act outside the confines of their parish to move out and make room for those who would. He complained about recruiting the wrong people. Too few were apostolic. They spent too much time assisting the priest in his pastoral duties.

I’ll leave Cardijn and Bob Santamaria there. That is sufficient for you to gain a sense of their approaches.


Conclusion

The difference between the two men was centred on their understanding of Church.

Santamaria’s Church was the triumphant, static and visible Church in which many of us grew up. It was the Church of order, of hierarchies, of rewards and punishments, of the pope as the Vicar of Christ on earth and infallible in matters of faith and morals. It was the one true Church: male, authoritarian, and clerical. It stated its truths in propositional statements to which the faithful gave their assent. As a divine institution, it understood divine law and interpreted natural law. As such, it was superior to State and secular laws.

It had a political stamp about it, and throughout history it had shouldered its way into historical events, protecting its interests, valuing its prestige, while attempting to enforce its laws and demonstrate its power.

It was the clichéd barque of Peter, riding the storms, always threatened by enemies. Faith in this model was faith in a set of beliefs and an institution which defined and safeguarded those beliefs.

Cardijn

Cardijn’s Church was the invisible Church.

It was the Church that struggled to breathe under the visible Church. It was the Church of the Redemption and the Incarnation, not as theological truths to be believed but as truths to be lived out in the real world.
Christ had entered the world to redeem it and, for Cardijn, He never left it. Christ was incarnate in every aspect of His creation. It was the Church more of the heart than of the head. Knowing God was more important than knowledge about God. Faith in this Church came down to a relationship with the God who dwelt within.

Cardijn’s Church was apostolic. Its task was to continue the building of the Kingdom begun by Christ – a Kingdom of love and justice and peace. This Kingdom was bigger than the Church. The clerical leaders in the Church had the responsibility of forming their members to act as other Christs in the world. Only through the work of the laity would the redemption continue.

Cardijn’s church embraced the whole world for everyone had been redeemed; every living thing was shot through with the spirit of Christ. Cardijn’s church was a dynamic lay church, ever changing, ever responding to new challenges. It was a Church forever humble, forever powerless.