

THE GUILDS—A MEDIEVAL INSTITUTION

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HE thirteenth century has often been extolled for its high achievements along intellectual lines. Less often has it been praised for its achievements along economic lines, and here lies one of its greatest claims to glory. In the thirteenth century not only wisdom, but labor too was invested with great dignity and reverence. The guilds about which we are to speak depended for their very existence upon the accepted principle that work in the shops was just as important as the work in the Universities. Wealthy Rome and Jerusalem had despised the gnarled and grimy hands of the workman, but Christ had recognized and sanctified labor. He could have been born in any condition of society He chose. He chose to be born within the ranks of the working class. At the end of His life of Labor He had been able to say: It is consummated; My *work* is finished. Labor has been exalted by the toil of Christ. Workingmen have been sustained by the thought that they are coworkers with Jesus.

Such a high conception of the dignity and value of labor found expression in the important medieval institution known as the guilds. The guilds were not an innovation of the thirteenth century, for they had existed earlier in some form in Constantinople and Rome. Nor were they to reach their highest development until the later Middle Ages.

The guilds were medieval labor organizations. In system they were conducted along much the same lines as the famous medieval Universities. First there was a long period of preparation of from three to twelve years, during which time the apprentice lived under his master's roof and strove to acquire proficiency in his craft. For his work he received no wages other than food and lodging. But the master treated him as his own son, and along with his education in the technicalities of the craft the apprentice received a sound moral training. Labor was

not to be divorced from the inspiration of religion for some time yet.

After the first period of instruction there followed another of from three to four years duration, in which the apprentice (now called journeyman) traveled through Europe, studied the methods and technique of other masters, and worked for wages. At the end of this time, matured in skill, he returned home to make his bid for the mastership. In the medieval Universities the applicant for a degree had to present to the authorities a dissertation upon some part of his studies. If it were accepted, he received the degree of master. So it was in the guilds. Instead of presenting a dissertation, the journeyman offered to the masters of his guild a piece of his handiwork. If it were accepted he became a master craftsman who could exercise his trade in public and take in apprentices. The craft masters were as proud of their high degree as the Philosophers and Scientists were of theirs, for such a degree entitled its owner to complete recognition in his guild. It also brought him certain preferences in the State and in the Church. Serfs, for example, who became masters in a craft were thereby made citizens. Mayors and other public officials were selected from the ranks of the guild masters.

The guild system wielded a strong influence upon thirteenth century economics and politics. "The merchant guilds aimed at securing commercial advantages for their members and obtaining the monopoly of the trade of some particular country,"¹ and in this they were not unlike our Chambers of Commerce. On the other hand, "the craft guilds aimed at the protection and improvement of the various trades."² "From the eleventh century onward we find artisans of the crafts combining to buy raw materials and combat foreign competition."³ A member of the guild was confident that his work would find a just price, for prices, as well as wages, were fixed by the guilds on a basis of social justice. But work had to measure up to a high standard of quality or be subjected to a stern boycott. Hence "the guilds ensured alike the economic independence of the producer and the interests of the consumers."⁴

¹ *Catholic Encyclopedia*. "Guilds."

² *Ibid.*

³ *Cambridge Medieval History*. Vol. VI, p. 525.

⁴ *Cambridge Medieval History*. Vol. VI, p. 525.

The first economic and social problem the guilds met was that of insurance. Membership in a guild entailed the payment of a tax against such eventualities as sickness, disabling accidents, old age and theft. Spiritual insurance too, such as a worthy public funeral and masses for the dead, was well taken care of.

It was within the province of the guild to direct and fix the hours of labor and to regulate open shop work. It is an interesting fact that the guilds succeeded in enforcing an eight-hour day! *Sweat-shop* and child-labor were rendered practically impossible by the stringent rules of the guilds. Guild-rules in many cases meant Church-rules, for the period was one in which economic and religious life were so intimately bound together that it was the theologians of the time who were the final judges of the morality even of industrial regulations.

Today our own government has likewise drastically limited the hours of labor in an attempt to restrict the selfish over-production of the *big-business* period. Within comparatively recent years the working hours of the week have been successively scaled down from seventy-two to forty-eight and now to forty-hours a week. This was quite an ordinary thing under the guild system. As a matter of fact, there were not a great many forty-hour weeks in the year, for the calendar was generously sprinkled with holy- or holidays imposed by the Church and approved by the guilds. These appreciably limited the hours of labor. Many holidays meant leisure for the laborers, and a reduced period of production meant the maintainance of a closer balance between supply and demand.

Not so many centuries ago the well-traveled roads that led from Paris to Italy were populated with the journeymen of many guilds. There would have been guildsmen from the Six Guilds of Paris; weavers, doctors, furriers, judges and notaries from the Seven Greater Florentine Guilds; bakers and carpenters and others from the Fourteen Lesser Guilds of Florence.⁵ Nor does this by any means exhaust the list, for some of the journeymen would have been sword-makers, armorers, scribes or illuminators belonging to various guilds. At the beginning of the sixteenth century most of these men doubtless were members of the highly organized Hanseatic League—an extension of the guild idea into extensive exportation and importation. All

⁵ Knight, *Economic History of Europe*, p. 120.

agents of the Hanseatic League had to be unmarried men; they had to lead exemplary religious lives and were strictly forbidden to use profanity.⁶

Membership in a medieval guild meant more than membership in an industrial society means today. For if a guild member chanced to fall sick while traveling, he was taken into a master's home and cared for with brotherly solicitude. Membership in a guild too was something like a badge or passport for the traveler, because it made his entrance into the business life of the town comparatively easy. Moreover, guildsmen could obtain help or protection from guild officials of other towns. In a sense the guild system was an extension of a christian family life.

Unquestionably the guilds were especially adapted to meet the needs of the Middle Ages. They solved many pressing problems and made life and business a more human affair than it had been. It is the custom for unthinking modernists to utter the shibboleth that the newest is always the best. Certainly our latest scientific equipment is much better than that of a pioneer like Lavoisier, and our automobiles are now more comfortable and more easily handled than were the first dozen. Yet we have a great deal to learn from the Middle Ages with regard to social relations, for this is one field in which the newest is not necessarily the best. Certainly we would be much better off if we could reintroduce into our lives the Middle Age Christian concept of life and its importance, of man's intimate relation of God and through God to his neighbor. Today we are undeniably more comfortable than the people of those days of long ago, but the question—are we happier?—may not always be answered in the affirmative. The guilds, which the Protestant self-styled Reformers abolished as superstitions, went far towards making life and labor happy and congenial.

Notable among the few prominent guilds existing in America today are the St. Apollinaris Guild of Boston (Dental), which is conducted along nearly the same lines as the guilds of old, and the Blackfriars Guild of Washington (Dramatic). There are others too, but none of them, nor all of them taken together, can give us an idea of the all-important place they occupied in the life of the thirteenth century.

It is quite natural that a human institution like the guilds

⁶ Knight, *Economic History of Europe*, p. 212.

should have had many decided drawbacks. The most serious of these was their apparent inability to fit into a period of great production. The guilds wholly died out, as a matter of fact, in such a period as was introduced by the industrial revolution. Again, in spite of all precautions, guild products did not always measure up to the desired standard, and some of the men who were called masters were nothing more than cheats and frauds. The privileges enjoyed by the higher members of the guilds were only too often made to serve selfish interest; while politics counted heavily in judgments of products, regulations of labor and in the parcelling out of monopolies.

Yet the guild idea remains a popular one, and we find it cropping up again and again in modern economic circles. According to Mr. Denis Gwynn, the attempt of the NRA "to restrict the freedom of capitalists to use their wealth in whatever direction they choose" plus its encouragement of the trade unions, bears definite resemblance to the guild idea. Then too there is the present endeavor to mold into single craft units the representative members of all the major industries. The plan is to have members of both laboring and employing classes meet in one council to arbitrate their difficulties, leaving the last word with the Government. This same application of *salutary discipline* on the part of the government has been very evident in the new Fascist State; Mussolini's avowed aim is to make Italy a corporative state, and he has not hesitated to make full use of his dictatorial power to compel the better situated classes to aid the poorer classes.

The attempts in both Italy and America to reestablish the guild idea on a modern basis deserves a sincere trial. The ideas the guilds taught were sound, namely, that to labor was in a sense to pray; that the workingman had the right to obtain daily bread for himself and his family; that too high a wall ought not be reared between employer and employee; and that therefore the common good of the commonweal demanded moderation in all business enterprise. This last idea was lost sight of when the guilds were abolished, definitely, in the eighteenth century, with what disastrous results we have all witnessed. So it might be well to keep an eye on this new movement that seems so akin to the guilds. To bring back to industry the life-giving spirit of Christ the Laborer,—surely this is an ideal that should meet with our warmest approval and heartiest cooperation.