

## The Popes' Producers

By  
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On August 14th a mixed Glee Club of young English speaking Catholics stood on the stone steps of the Sun Life Building and sang a song of welcome at Montreal's official reception for Monsignor Refice and his famed Roman Singers. It was a high honour for the Saint Genesius Players Guild and perhaps as good an indication as any of the progress made by the Guild in the last four years.

In May 1943 the Guild consisted of eleven young ladies and a Chaplain. It had no name, no money, no library, no place to meet, no experience in things theatrical, nothing but a burning desire to establish in Montreal a Guild which would put into practice the recommendations on recreation laid down in the official teaching of the Church. When his Excellency the Most Reverend Joseph Charbonneau, Archbishop of Montreal, granted the present chaplain permission to found such a Guild on *January 19th, 1944*, the members immediately set to work. Out of their unselfish devotion to "the cause," out of their ability to sell the idea to others has grown the Saint Genesius Players Guild of to-day. Instead of eleven young ladies the Guild now numbers a mixed group of well over a hundred members. Instead of talking theatre the Guild now operates a Drama Section, a Glee Club Section, a Radio Workshop and a Radio Choir. As the number of members grew meetings could no longer be held only in the homes of the members. The Sisters of Service first offered assistance by allowing weekly meetings to be held in a large room in their Dorchester Street residence. This in turn became inadequate to house the ever expanding needs of the Guild. At the present time the Guild rents an auditorium and classroom in D'Arcy McGee High School two evenings a week, avails itself of the kind offer of Mr. Walter P. Downs for the free use of his recording studio three evenings a week, holds rehearsals in the large studio at Station CJAD, over which Station it produces a weekly dramatic show, and has its own downtown office on Peel Street where a full-time Office Manager is employed.

From this bare outline of growth you will realize what a terrific amount of work and time have been devoted to the development of the Guild. The question probably comes to your minds: Why all this fuss over recreation?

### THE POPES AND PLAY

"Saintly Pius X asked that 'all things be restored in Christ.' By all things he meant just that: **OMNIA** 'all things.' He wanted Christ brought back into every phase of human life – into the home, school, factory, office, the crafts, the arts, even (perhaps especially) into the lighter phase of man's life known as recreation" writes

Father Francis Wendell, O. P.<sup>1</sup> And how can we doubt this? Did not Leo XIII in his unforgettable Encyclical on the “Conditions of the Workingman” pause long enough to point out that man must have recreation?<sup>2</sup> and later this same Pope showed that the recreation would have to be worthy of man’s human dignity but that this would include the Theatre, for the Church “GIVES ENCOURAGEMENT TO EVERY KIND OF ART AND HANDICRAFT<sup>3</sup> insisting only “THAT VICES WHICH CORRUPT THE HEART AND MORAL LIFE, SHOULD BE DILIGENTLY REPRESSED BY PUBLIC AUTHORITY LEST THEY INSIDIOUSLY WORK THE RUIN OF THE STATE.”<sup>4</sup> True enough these are general statements and not directly aimed at the Theatre but they do serve to prepare us for the Words of Pius XI when in his renowned letter on the Christian Education of Youth he states clearly, unmistakably: “WORTHY OF ALL PRAISE AND ENCOURAGEMENT THEREFORE ARE THOSE EDUCATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS WHICH HAVE FOR THEIR OBJECT TO POINT OUT TO PARENTS AND EDUCATORS, BY MEANS OF SUITABLE BOOKS AND PERIODICALS, THE DANGERS TO MORALS AND RELIGION THAT ARE OFTEN CUNNINGLY DISGUISED IN BOOKS AND **THEATRICAL REPRESENTATIONS**. IN THEIR SPIRIT OF ZEAL FOR THE SOULS OF THE YOUNG, THEY ENDEAVOUR AT THE SAME TIME TO CIRCULATE GOOD LITERATURE AND TO PROMOTE PLAYS THAT ARE REALLY INSTRUCTIVE, GOING SO FAR AS TO PUT UP AT A “COST OF GREAT SACRIFICES, THEATRES AND CINEMA, IN WHICH VIRTUE WILL HAVE NOTHING TO SUFFER AND MUCH TO GAIN.”<sup>5</sup> And this fits in perfectly with the age old teaching of the Church that the Christian does not renounce the activities of this life, he does not stunt his natural faculties, rather he develops and perfects them by co-ordinating them with the Supernatural. The true Christian takes the Theatre – which in itself is neither good nor bad – makes it naturally and then supernaturally good.<sup>6</sup>

In 1930 Pius XI in his well known encyclical on Marriage<sup>7</sup> and again in 1937 in his letter on Communism<sup>8</sup> warns of the terrible effect for evil the Theatre is having on modern society. In the latter he mentions not only the Theatre but also the cinema and radio.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Formation of the Lay Apostolate* – Francis N. Wauasu., O. P. Third Order of St. Dominic, 130 East 60th St., N.Y. 1943 p. 42.

<sup>2</sup> *Rerum Novarum* – Encyclical Letter of Pope Leo XIII.

<sup>3</sup> *Christian Constitution of States* – Encyclical Letter of Pope Leo XIII.

<sup>4</sup> *Human Liberty* – Encyclical Letter of Pope Leo XIII.

<sup>5</sup> *Christian Education of Youth* – Encyclical Letter of Pius XI.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. passim “*Mysteries End*” – An Investigation of the Last Days of the Medieval Religious Stage – Harold C. Gardiner S.J. Yale University Press, 1946.

<sup>7</sup> *Christian Marriage in Our Days* – Encyclical Letter of Pius XI.

<sup>8</sup> *Atheistic Communism* – Encyclical Letter of Pius XI.

It is not astonishing then to find an Encyclical entitled *Improper Motion Pictures* published for the universal Church under the authority of His Holiness Pope Pius XI. In this document we find the definite answer to the Church's attitude towards recreation in general and Movies in particular. We read: "Recreation in its manifold variety has become a necessity of people who labor under the fatiguing conditions of modern industry. But it must be worthy of the rational nature of man and therefore must be morally healthy. IT MUST BE ELEVATED TO A POSITIVE FACTOR FOR GOOD, AND MUST SEEK TO AROUSE NOBLE SENTIMENTS. . ." And again: "It is necessary to apply to the cinema a supreme rule which must direct and regulate even the greatest of arts in order that it may not find itself in continual conflict with Christian morality or even simply with human morality based upon natural laws. The essential purpose of arts, its "raison d'être," is to assist in the perfecting of the moral personality, which is man. For this reason it must itself be moral . ." And to crown it all we read: "... they, as Bishops, are under obligation to interest themselves in every form of decent and healthy recreation because they are responsible before God for the moral welfare of their people, even during their leisure."<sup>9</sup>

#### THE POPE'S PRODUCERS

The Guild took all these Papal pronouncements to heart. It set about training young Catholics to participate in this work of the Hierarchy – the work of restoring Christ in the Theatre. Accepting as its specialized milieu The Theatrical World in Montreal, it has tried to develop in its members the real spirit of Catholic Action along with a mastery of the techniques of Stage and Radio. It sees a threefold effect: first on its own members, secondly, on the other artists with whom they come in contact, and thirdly upon the audiences who listen to or see their productions. While the Guild is still far too young to have achieved any startling results the following brief enumeration of what has been done will give you some idea of the progress made.

#### GLEE CLUB SECTION

Since its inception the Glee Club has met at least once each week from September through till the end of June. On many occasions they have rehearsed as often as three times a week. The result of these many and long rehearsals has been shown in numerous concerts. We are proud of the invitation which provided us with the honour of singing a greeting to the Roman Singers on their official civic reception in Montreal. Looking back over the years, we find the Glee Club has done Concerts in aid of the Dominion War Bond Drives, Marianopolis College, St.

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<sup>9</sup> *Improper Motion Pictures* – Encyclical Letter of Pius XI.

Mary's Hospital Auxiliary, the Federation of Catholic Charities, The Catholic Sailor's Club, Manresa Retreat House. It has also provided entertainment for the convalescing soldiers in the Veterans' Hospital and for the aged in the care of The Little Sisters of the Poor. An unforgettable event was when they knelt on a stage in Ontario and received the first blessing of newly-ordained Father Frank Foley, for whom they had travelled a hundred miles to present an evening concert at the invitation of the Pastor, Father Michael O'Brien of the Diocese of Alexandria.

They have sung the Christmas Midnight Mass for Franciscans for the last two years. They travelled to Cap de la Madeleine twice to supply the choral music for pilgrimages and recently supplied at very short notice a choir to sing nine English hymns for a Novena broadcast by the Oblate Fathers over three radio stations in Ontario and Quebec.

A local station has carried the Glee Club in Christmas Carols for the last two years. Beyond any doubt their largest audience was for a series of five broadcasts over the Trans-Canada hook-up for the C.B.C.'s "Religious Period." Over and above these non-profit ventures the Guild has featured the Glee Club in many local concerts.

A division of the Glee Club, the Radio Choir, under the direction of Miss Mary Berini, has supplied Choral music for the Montreal Catholic Hour and background music for many of the Guild Radio Dramatizations.

The Glee Club numbers about forty voices and is directed by Dr. Leo Roy, a young medical student of the University of Montreal. We are very happy to have this young layman directing the Glee Club as it is the aim of the Guild to have lay leadership whenever possible. We go back, however, in fond thanksgiving to Brother Matthias of D'Arcy McGee High School, Sister St. Francis of Alverno of St. Dominic's High School and Mother St. Mary Margaret of St. Patric's High School, who in the first year, formed the group of inexperienced singers and laid the foundation upon which its present modicum of success has been built.

Indirectly at least, their singing has had a good effect on their listeners. During Broadcasts, many non-Catholic office and social friends of the singers listened to the talks on Christian marriage because they wished to hear their friends sing. Even perfect strangers were attracted to the program by the high standard of the musical introduction. This was brought home to us by the numerous letters we received at the end of the series. The effect for good on the members themselves is also noteworthy, quite apart from the fact that they have risen from such romantic titbits as "The Cement Mixer" to the power and dignity of Palestrina. A young lady of much talent was, I'm afraid, rather thoughtless – anything for her own fun. She did not have the slightest notion that God had given her that talent to help make this world a better place to live in. This charter member of the Glee Club had exceptional talent which for two years previous to joining the Guild she had neglected. We did our best to persuade her to return to her, musical studies even though we knew that this would mean she would have less time to devote to the Guild. When she finally made up her mind and told us that as a result she would be unable to handle the two important positions she had filled in the past, she was

asked which job she would like to keep, she replied: "That's not the question, Father – the question is: where can I be the most use?" An incident such as this provides striking example of the benefits derived by many through their GROUP work. Lessons of charity, co-operation, dependability, unselfishness, along with the more obvious training which comes from the discipline of long rehearsals, the cultural benefits of studying and singing great music, the poise and decorum which comes from public appearances.

#### DRAMA SECTION

In the dramatic field we have achieved a more quiet kind of success. For the most part we have been content to study and practice the "dramatic art." We have concentrated on lectures, study meetings and Student Night entertainments in which the members demonstrated their acquired knowledge and skill not for the plaudits of the public but for the stern criticism of competent judges. Since we started, the drama group has given numerous entertainments to the different institutions in Montreal. Its lighting and make-up crews have helped at least thirteen of the Parishes of the City and other non-parochial groups such as the Missa Drama Festival whose makeup the Guild has provided free since it first started. It is worth mentioning, I think, that none of those serving on the make-up crew and only one of the men on the lighting crew, had any previous experience in this work before entering the Guild. The one major production so far produced by the Drama section has been "Christmas on the Village Square," a Nativity play by the late great French Apostle of the Stage, Henri Gheon. This play has now become an annual event with the Guild and a measure of its success can be taken from the fact that apart from the Guild's own production last year it was also shown in two Montreal Parishes and earned for the Guild the unique distinction of an invitation to play it in three localities in Vermont. We believe that we are the only English speaking Catholic Group in Montreal ever to have invaded the States with a dramatic presentation. Above all we glory in the manner in which those who have not yet appeared in public performances have remained true to the aims of the Guild, sacrificing their time and effort in the thankless behind-the-scenes activity which alone has made possible the success achieved by the Guild in its Glee Club work and Radio productions.

Something happened away back in 1943 which demonstrates the Dramatic Group's unselfish desire to advance the cause of Christ on the stage. At that time we did not have much to offer anyone – nothing but the promise of a glorious Easter in time to come and of a hard heavy Calvary in the meantime. A young lady – who had all sorts of voice and technical training in things theatrical quit after one meeting stating that she could learn nothing from us. (This was all too true in dramatics but not in Catholic Action?) As the time came for our first major production we decided to throw the casting open to non-members as well as members in order that the Catholic play would be acted by the best talent possible. Who walked in AND OFF with the leading female role but the young lady

mentioned above! It is to the everlasting credit of the young ladies who had remained true to the Guild that they did not object to her getting the role. The spirit which this story emphasizes is one of the Guild has made its own. The spirit which the noted Catholic playwright Emmett Lavery wrote of, when he said: "Let's remember that the work in view (The Catholic Theatre) is bigger than any of the labourers in the vineyard. Let's cling to the old motto that a lot of good can be accomplished in the world if not too much attention is paid to who gets the credit ..."<sup>10</sup> We take keen delight in the final notes of this story. You know God has a way of blessing those who take the trouble to make the sign of the cross or to lift the cross and carry it . . . we feel that he smiled down with just goodness when an outside director who knew nothing of this story just related, re-cast the play after a month's rehearsals and gave the coveted part to a young lady from the Guild! So you see, it is possible to have your cake and eat it too!

The spirit of work and sacrifice for the cause – let the glory fall where it may, explains the unselfishness of the Drama Section, when after a full year's study they gracefully slipped into a back seat and used the knowledge they had gained, the little money they had managed to save, to help bring the Glee Club into spotlight – the spirit which later helped the Glee Club provide a Radio Choir for the Catholic Hour the spirit which later had the Drama Section with some help from the Glee Club organize and support "PLAY OF THE WEEK," the Guild's Radio program.

#### RADIO SECTION

In radio we have a unique record. The Guild's "Play of the Week" is the longest running English speaking amateur dramatic show in Montreal's radio history. According to Radio World's<sup>11</sup> controversy on the subject of the first regular Radio Show broadcast by amateurs in Canada, the Guild ranks second only to a Toronto Production. But the latter is organized and produced by professional radio men. The Guild is all amateur. The show is broadcast each Sunday from September to May over Station CJAD, Montreal which carries it as a public service program.

The over-all cost of our radio apostolate, thanks to the generosity of Mr. Arthur Dupont, owner-manager of the Station and Mr. Walter Downs, of the Walter P. Downs Ltd., and World Music, amounts to some thirty dollars a week. This includes the purchase and duplicating of radio scripts, rental of rehearsal halls, cutting of transcriptions and all the operating costs of the Radio Workshop, wherein we train and teach those interested in appearing on the broadcast. When one compares this thirty dollars with the nine hundred to a thousand dollars that a show such as this would normally cost you can realize how we have benefitted from the generosity of the above named men. To Mr. Downs in particular, we owe a special

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<sup>10</sup> The Curtain Goes up on the Catholic Theatre – Emmet Lavery America Press, March 6, 1937.

<sup>11</sup> Issues of Radio World for June 1946, Montreal

word of thanks for the training he gave us when we started in radio and for his gracious help and advice whenever we turn to him. However, in spite of the assistance given to the Guild by Mr. Dupont. and Mr. Downs we still do run up a sizeable account over the year. Multiplying the thirty dollars weekly cost by some thirty-eight weeks each season, you can see that our radio bill goes into the four figures. Is it worth it?

We argue that if smart business men, trying to sell their products, are willing to spend as much as one thousand dollars, and often more, a week in radio advertising, that we who are trying to sell the Truth and Beauty of Christ should not complain at spending this much for an entire season in radio advertising! How do we advertize? What type of shows do we do?

Our show is aimed at all right-thinking men. It is not branded as Catholic nor churchy in tone. We believe that many listen to our programs who would not listen to a Catholic Radio talk. Our hope is to show them by a dramatic story method, the beauty and happiness of life founded upon Christian principles. We seek to instruct, inspire and entertain.

Our first season in radio we dealt almost solely with the lives of the Saints. Since that time we have been able to branch out and include the lives of famous men and women, as well as plays which deal with modern problems. For instance, this year we have biographies of Thompson, Chesterton, Patmore, Kilmer and St. Thomas More. We have a clever allegory entitled The Popish Plot, which shows the basic weakness of Communism (or any "Rule by power" ideology), a lovely comedy entitled The Toy Trumpet, the inspiring story of Florence Nightingale, a re-broadcast of last year's prize winning script Call Back the Yesteryears, a heartwarming story of modern marriage, and many others. Do these scripts actually have any effect on the listening audience? We are sure they do.

That they bring a great deal of joy and consolation to shut-ins, there can be no doubt. But they do inspire and instruct others. A married man (who would never listen to a Catholic Talk on Marriage) came to me after one of our broadcasts on marriage and said: "Father, after listening to the broadcast last night, I've decided to quit running around. Will you hear my confession?" Another time a local High School Graduate who looked like a Powers Model and sang like a night club singer gushed: "Gee Father, I like those Radio Plays!" Knowing she was rarely seen unsupported by a male on each arm, I jokingly said: "Oh, all the girls are saying that since we did that love story about Tuffy, the K of C Canteen worker." "But Father, that's not the one I like most. I thought the story of Brother Andre most interesting and I liked the life of John McCormick next best." One of the members who has acted in many of the plays told me that a woman in her office began to listen because she was in the plays. The woman – who had lost a son overseas – was extremely bitter and somewhat of a bigot. After listening to the play "A Mother's Way of the Cross" the woman approached the Guild member first thing in the office Monday morning and said: "You know what I think of your Church (and her eyes filled with tears) but I must admit it does give those who believe some consolation." Then there is the non-Catholic "fan" who likes the program so much,

he has been known to keep three tables of MIXED-bridge quiet so that he can listen to the program ... incidentally, he prefers the lives of the saints. Then there is the big Jewish man who was delighted to hear that we were broadcasting at 2.05 this year as he wouldn't have to fight with his wife who wanted to keep tuned to Stage 47, while he insisted on turning to our program! Yes, we think the broadcast does have some effect!

While we are not satisfied with our productions we feel that we are slowly improving and that our Workshop – especially our Scriptwriters' Workshop will in time turn out Catholics, well able to dramatize the beauty which is our Christian heritage.

#### THE GUILD AND THE CHURCH

In this short story of the Guild we have left many things unsaid. We have not mentioned the Montreal Catholic Summer Schools, where we have had the privilege of staging the evening or local entertainment for Father Lord, S. J., his staff and students since they first came to Montreal. We have not paid the Summer School of Catholic Action their due for inspiration and help they have been to us. We have left out the names of many who have helped by support or opposition – for anything worth while thrives on opposition. We have left out many things. But before closing we should like to point out that the Guild is a member of the Catholic Theatre Conference, N. Y. and has helped to spread this movement in Canada. Also, at the present time the Guild is serving as a centre of information for Catholic Broadcasters in Canada and working with other groups in the United States to form a Catholic Broadcasters Association. This year we have started to publish scripts suitable for broadcast by other Catholic groups. In this way we are enlarging the sphere of our influence and at the same time helping to develop new Catholic scriptwriters as well as aid other amateur groups who are trying to break into radio.

#### THE GUILD, THE PARISH AND THE COMMUNITY

In conformity with an article of its constitution the Guild is bound to help all Parish organizations. So insistent on this is the Guild that any person becoming a member is told that his own parish must come first, even before the interest of the St. Genesius Players' Guild. It recognizes that many Parishes do not have theatrical societies and that those which do are unable to provide the members with all the advantages of a city wide Catholic group. It provides an outlet for those who do not have such societies – and hopes that they, with these who come to the Guild when they are not occupied in their own parishes, will return to their respective parishes ever better equipped to perform the theatrical arts, better equipped to apply the Papal recommendations of true art and true recreation.

With Father Hartke, O. P. of Catholic University, it recognizes the need for a central Catholic group for "The Catholic Little Theatre group must be committed to the purpose of giving the best that is in the theatre to the people in their community. I say 'community,' because, for the best type of work the Little Theatre in the majority of cases cannot be confined to a single parish . . . It must be an organization made up of members from several, if not all, parishes in a community. It is only in this way that the Catholic Little Theatre can achieve its ends . . ."<sup>12</sup> And its ends are clear from what the Popes have said. Its ends are necessary as argued by Father Urban Nagle, O. P., Ph. D., for the great majority of men are influenced far more by the concrete imagery of stage and screen than by the abstract reasoning of lectures in philosophy.<sup>13</sup>

To achieve the ends which are clear and necessary we must not allow our love for our Parish to become a false love. In the civil sphere we have seen how a virtuous love of nation has, under pride and jealousy, been twisted into the vice of false nationalism . . . false patriotism . . . which bars the way to world unity and peace. False parochialism would be far worse. Our love and pride in our Parish must not hold up anything that will help spread the word of God. We must recognize that a parish is but one of thousands in the Mystical Body of Christ. That, on occasion we must soar high above Parish boundaries and on wings of charity united with Christ-bearers from other Parishes and other Dioceses bring to bear the powerful concentrated effects of our Catholic Unity. Maybe we as individual Catholics, as individual parishes, as individual dioceses cannot change Broadway or Hollywood or Radio City, but banded together we can do much. Negatively the Legion of Decency has already done much and will do more. But there is still room for positive unity. Members from all Parishes united in a Central Catholic Theatre, Glee Club and Radio Guild can bring to bear the strength of unity.

Ours is a special obligation. We as Catholics possess revealed truth and beauty – have it in its fullness and with the infallible interpretation of Christ's own Church. We must spread it by all the modern media of propaganda. Others may find an excuse for cheap, vulgar entertainment on the score that "they know not what they do" . . . we have no such excuse. If Maxwell Anderson from the semi-darkness of half-truths can say of the theatre – it is an attempt to prove that man has a dignity and a destiny, that this life is worth living, that he is not purely animal and without purpose . . ."<sup>14</sup> who are better qualified to use it? This means work and hard work. It means we must be serious about play. It means that we who have the high ideals, the truth and the beauty must master the technical form which we will use to disseminate this treasure that has been entrusted to us. We must know the medium. We must develop the artistic talent in the young. We must also see that

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<sup>12</sup> *The Catholic Little Theatre* – Rev. Gilbert Hartke O.P. – Director Graduate School of Drama, Catholic University, Washington, D.C. The Bulletin, Vol. I No. 3, 1937, Catholic U.

<sup>13</sup> *Your National Catholic University* – Press Release – March 3, 1939 Bureau of Public Relations, The Catholic University of America, Washington, D. C.

<sup>14</sup> Rutgers Graduation Address delivered by Maxwell Anderson in 1941.

talent is not misused – to make money by pandering to all that is low and degrading in human weakness, nor abused by not reaching the full extent of its “gift” because of the laziness or selfishness of the individual or because of the lack of help or inspiration on the part of parents and teachers. Too often in the past has God-given talent been left unused.<sup>15</sup> There has been too much artistic birth control. Remember the parable of the talents.

At the conclusion of one of the Summer School Shows in Montreal, Father Roger Lyons, S. J. in his words of appreciation told the Guild “You are singing Encyclicals” ... What is the aim of the Guild? To sing, dance, act, and broadcast the encyclicals so that talent may be used for the greater Glory of God, the greater perfection of the individual performer, and the greater sanctification and happiness of our audiences.

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<sup>15</sup> *What is Education* – Edward Lean, C.S.Sp. Especially Chapter XI. Burns, Oates, & Washbourne Ltd., London, Eng., 1943.