

O’Rahilly, the Jesuits, and Labour Education

During the 1940s, proposals to extend third-level education for Irish workers began to emerge.

In 1947, Jesuit Provincial Fr. Thomas Byrne proposed the creation of a “Social Centre” that would research social issues and ultimately support a dedicated college for workers.



Alfred O’Rahilly, President of University College Cork (1943-1954), initiated workers’ courses in the late 1940s in the university. He sought to extend labour education beyond Munster and appealed to Jesuits in Dublin to help establish a similar initiative in the capital. He warned that by depriving Irish workers of a strong Catholic foundation this could lead to them becoming vulnerable to the threat of dangerous Communist influences.

He stated:

“After all our struggle to have Catholic national schools, is Dublin going to sit idly by and see the Catholic workers of Ireland induced into secularism and communism? [...] I regard this as the most serious threat to the religion of the Irish worker since I reached the age of reason”.

Although the Jesuits largely ignored O’Rahilly’s direct appeals, they were simultaneously pursuing initiatives to bolster labour education for Irish workers through Catholic social teaching.

In 1947, they sent Fr Edmund Kent to the United States of America to investigate and learn from Jesuit labour colleges and gather ideas for a future Irish institution.

The Jesuits also began searching for a suitable location for what they hoped would become a permanent workers’ college.

Extra-Mural Classes at UCD (1948–1950)



Fr Edward Coyne, S.J.,

The first practical move towards a workers' college came in 1948, with the establishment of extra-mural classes at University College Dublin.

Under pressure from Alfred O'Rahilly to introduce labour courses, and mindful of staff concerns about the potential presence of overt religious influence on these classes, UCD President Michael Tierney sought the assistance of the Jesuits.

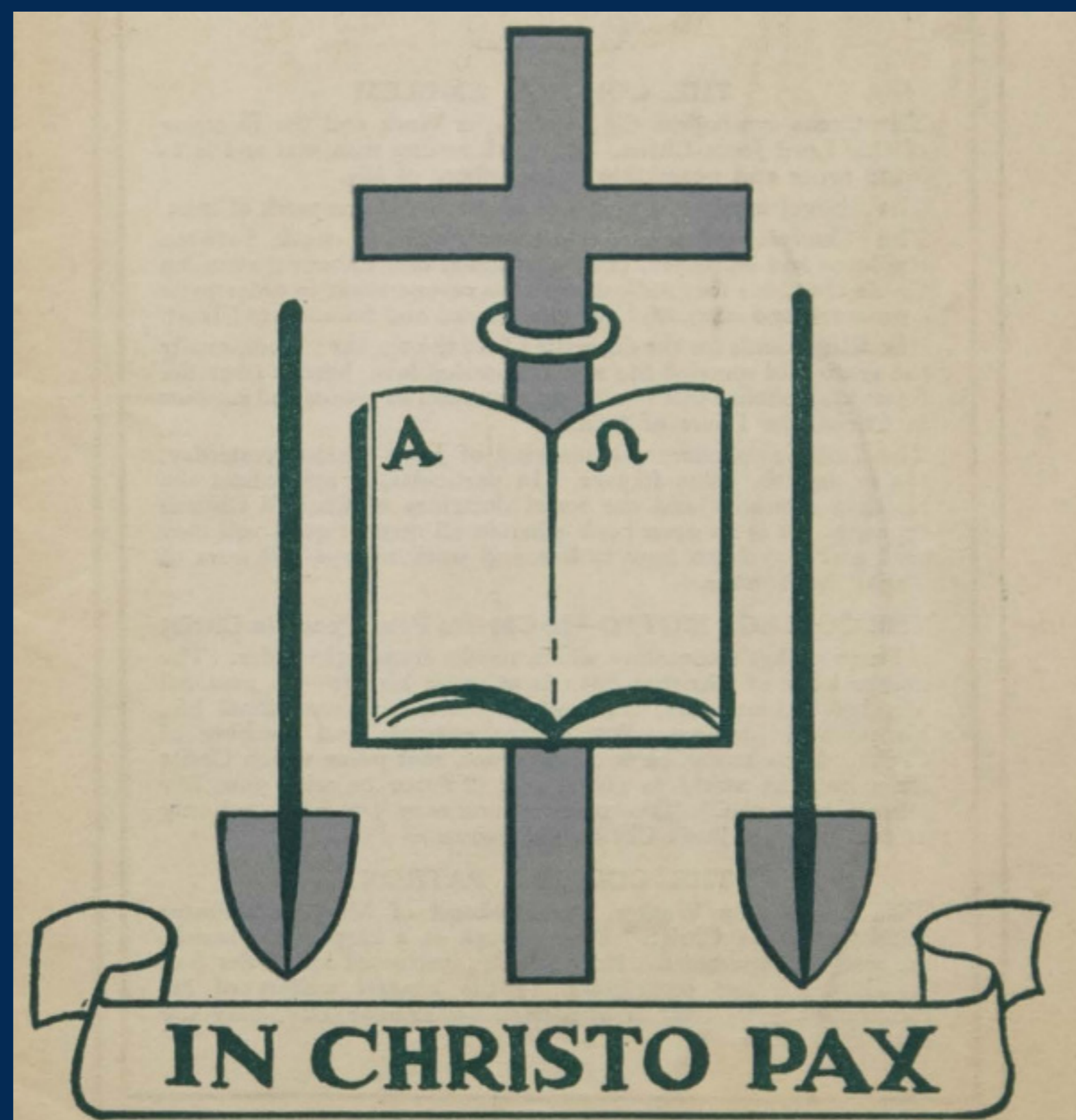
The classes were organised by Fr Edward Coyne, S.J., and were in partnership with

several trade unions. They offered workers access to subjects such as social, political, and economic science, which were areas traditionally reserved for university students.

In 1949, Fr Edmund Kent returned from the United States and joined Fr Coyne in running the programme. Their partnership, while often marked with disagreement, became a defining relationship that would eventually lead to the founding of the Catholic Workers' College.

The lectures aimed to bring some of the benefits of university education within reach of the "working classes". The course proved so successful that the Jesuits were further encouraged to pursue the planned Catholic Workers College.

The Opening of the Catholic Workers College



The Catholic Workers College officially opened at Sandford Lodge on Sandford Road in Ranelagh in February 1951 with classes commencing on 6th February. The College was led by Fr Coyne as Director, and he was assisted by Fr Kent, who was also a lecturer in the College.

In that first year there were 41 trade unionists enrolled in the College. Lectures were held two evenings a week and covered subjects such as economic and trade union issues, argumentation, and public speaking.

While rooted in labour education, the College also placed strong emphasis on Catholic social teaching. They offered lectures on the Christian Family, the Christian State, and Catholic social principles. This reflected the College's commitment to integrating Catholic ideology into the working lives of its students.

Student numbers grew steadily in the years following the College's opening. By 1954, enrolment had increased to 470 students, with a retention rate of 75%.

In the 1950s, Fr Coyne stepped down as Director of the College. While Fr Kent, who had overseen the day-to-day running of the College since 1954, was formally appointed as the new Director in 1956.

A New Extension



In 1956, rising demand for courses at the College led to the construction of a new extension. Its opening was attended by the Archbishop of Dublin John Charles McQuaid, Taoiseach John A. Costello, and Éamon de Valera, which reflected the College's growing national significance.

This expansion allowed for a landmark development. For the first time, women could be enrolled in the College. Fifty women enrolled in 1957, all of which were trade unionists. Their entry marked a significant shift in the College's history and in access to education for women engaged in industrial relations.

Women and the Catholic Workers College

For much of the early to mid-twentieth century, women in Ireland were largely excluded from public and economic life. *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, or the 1937 Constitution of Ireland, which reflected the values of Catholic social teaching, emphasised women's role within the home. The Marriage Bar, which was introduced in 1924 and not abolished until 1973, required women in the public sector, and later, many in the private sector, to leave employment upon marriage. Legislation such as this, which was reinforced by the prevailing social and political attitudes of the time, greatly restricted employment opportunities for women.



By 1961, only 29% of women participated in the labour force, and just 5% of married women were employed.

However, against this backdrop, the College offered women the opportunity to gain an education that would provide them with the skills and knowledge to enter the workforce. By the mid-1960s, women's participation had grown rapidly. Between 1956 and 1966, enrolment rose to 485 men and 317 women.

While women continued to experience structural inequality even within the College (women's studies were handled separately to men's), leadership within the College did acknowledge the importance of having skilled, knowledgeable, and Catholic men and women within the workforce and the benefit this would have on society.

As Fr Kent stated in a speech in 1960:

"All our students are mature men and women, the majority of them married with reasonably secure jobs [...] They enrol for these courses so that they may learn how to lead a more useful life, how they may make some contribution, however insignificant, to the societies of which they are members".