

'MYSTICI CORPORIS' AND THE LAY APOSTOLATE

CHRISTIAN APOLOGISTS are fond of pointing out the capacity which the Church possesses for adapting Her mission to the needs of any particular moment in history; the Church is eternally *modern*. To dispute the validity of this claim to modernity is to ignore the facts of history, but we may legitimately ask if the wondrous truth underlying such a claim is really grasped, when it is examined in the harsh light of polemics. A very perceptive writer once described the devastating social criticism of George Bernard Shaw as a kind of bulldozer, which smashed the flimsy facade of contemporary humanitarianism without supplying the necessary materials for the construction of a sturdy building of social reform. At times polemic intent is like a bulldozer, necessary for the destruction of objections, but hardly adequate for the construction of the cathedral of truth.

There is, unfortunately, a sort of polemicism that infiltrates the discussion of one of the most important aspects of a revitalized Christianity in our own day, the lay apostolate. This polemical attitude is the result of a profound and justified conviction that the laity have too often neglected their proper role in the fulfillment of the Church's mission, and that the clergy, in some cases, have not given the laity an opportunity to participate in the accomplishment of this mission. Recognizing the situation with a fair amount of objectivity, many writers ardently devoted to the lay apostolate have obscured the truth contained in their observations by an enthusiasm and zeal which have, in certain instances, hampered the understanding of just what such an apostolate entails. As polemicists must begin with the objections that threaten the truth which they seek to defend, so also the enthusiast of any particular cause frequently begins with such a detailed analysis of the abuses which he seeks to correct, that the essential value of his "cause" seldom finds complete expression. This has happened in many discussions about the lay apostolate. Concerned, as they must be, with the circumstances of contemporary daily life, with "the needs of the time," some writers forget "the needs of the Christian," who will provide the remedy for the times through the lay apostolate. Thus, the late Pope Pius XII warned members of the Church against the use of such expressions as "the emancipation of the laity" in the modern era, as if the end towards which the Church is directed were something divided; as if the apostolate of the laity

could be in competition and in conflict with the apostolate of the clergy (*Address to Lay Apostolate*, October 14, 1951).

In much the same way we find current discussion centered around what is called "existential" Christianity. It would be much better if we concentrated on Christianity that *exists*. This is not a mere exercise in semantics. Existential Christianity, of course, found its beginnings in the work of the great Danish writer, Søren Kierkegaard, who recognized with passionate precision the deplorable effects that Hegelian philosophy had produced in the Christian thought of his time. Despite many exaggerations in his mode of expression, Kierkegaard rendered invaluable assistance to the restoration of realistic thinking in Western culture. Just how invaluable this assistance was can be seen from the description of modern thought given by John Wild in his *The Challenge of Existentialism*:

. . . inattention to the immediate data of concrete experience; neglect of existence and first philosophy; a physicalist approach to the problem of human awareness, leading to subjectivism; and a radical separation of theory from practice, leading to the de-rationalization of ethics. It is not surprising that these trends have ended in the breakdown of a tradition that began three hundred years ago with Descartes. This tradition has now reached its end in the negativism of that so-called positivism which is now so prevalent in the universities of the Anglo-Saxon world (pp. 25-26).

But what were exaggerations in the work of Kierkegaard have become vicious errors in the writings of those who call themselves Existentialists today. And it is unfortunate that many ideas, current in Existentialist thought, have filtered down, through the medium of some theological tracts, into "practical solutions" for the Christianization of the twentieth century. As we pointed out above, concern with the needs of the time often enervates the power of the remedy proposed, since the remedy is never properly understood. Thus, we find the idea current that since Existentialism is contemporary, "thoroughly modern," it should offer the panacea for modern ills. And from this comes "existential" Christianity. It has influenced Protestant theology to such a degree that most Protestants are thrown back to an extreme fundamentalism regarding Sacred Scripture, in the understandable desire to salvage something of the shattered vessel of their faith.

But it has also influenced such valid and necessary movements as the lay apostolate itself. That is why we said that a distinction between "existential" Christianity and Christianity that *exists* is no mere problem of semantics. For example, one of the "dogmas" of Existentialism is that formulated by the high priest of French ex-

istential thought, Jean Paul Sartre: "existence precedes essence." Or more concretely, in the words of Sartre himself: "Man . . . exists only insofar as he realizes himself; he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions" (*Existentialism and Humanism*, p. 41). What is basic to this development of thought is something utterly anti-Christian: there is no God, man has no norm of morality other than himself and thus, he must make himself; moreover, the only reality is the human, and man becomes really human only in his operations, in his actions. Nothing so blatantly erroneous as this can be found in Christian writing, but when the frozen ground of atheistic Existentialism is watered down by the warm rains of Christian belief, then very peculiar species of plants begin to sprout.

Sartre's concept, modified by Christian belief, becomes something like activity without contemplation, that is, the Christian *does* before he understands what he *is*. This concept, further tailored to fit the lay apostolate, would urge the Christian to change the world before he has been transformed into a capable and fitting instrument for such a change. How many sincere and enthusiastic attempts in the realm of Catholic action have failed, precisely because *doing* preceded *being*, because existence preceded essence!

The objection that this manner of attacking problems is the ordinary, fallible human method contains a great deal of truth. But the danger to the lay apostolate comes from the fact that this fallible way of acting finds a pseudo-justification, if one has recourse to the tenets of an "existential" Christianity. That is why we believe that study should be directed towards an understanding of the Christianity that *exists*. And the point of departure for such an investigation, if the nature of the lay apostolate is to be understood correctly and thus given the opportunity to be really successful, is not merely an awareness of the needs of the time. The point of departure is the Teaching Authority of the Church. And this Authority, or Magisterium, is found most perfectly in the documents of him who holds the position of Teacher par excellence in the Christian Commonwealth, the Roman Pontiff. Even a casual perusal of the encyclicals and allocutions given by recent Pontiffs is enough to convince anyone that recourse to this Authority is the most fruitful area of investigation, for one who desires maximum success in the lay apostolate.

Moreover, it is our opinion that of all the numerous statements concerning this subject by the various Popes of the twentieth century, the highest place in this study must be given to the Encyclical Letter of His Holiness Pope Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis*, presented to the world on June 29, 1943. The choice of the Encyclical on the Mystical

Body of Christ may seem at first glance to be a strange one but if the lay apostle is to Christianize his environment effectively, he must first realize *who he is*, and this means that he must understand as completely as possible the reality of his membership in the Mystical Body. Only in this way can the obscurity which attends the manifold contingencies of daily living be illuminated by the piercing light of theological clarity. Only in attending to the voice of the living Magisterium of the Church can one understand and participate in the Christianity that *exists*.

But, granted that the Christian must know who he is before he can act effectively, what precisely is the connection between *Mystici Corporis* and the lay apostolate? The answer to this is simple, so simple in fact that it can be overlooked. Membership in the Mystical Body of Christ, for those who do not possess the character of priestly Ordination, is lay apostleship. To grasp the fact of this identification, we should first examine some of the words of Saint Paul, in whose Epistles we shall find the doctrine of the Mystical Body developed in great detail. The Apostle writes to the Colossians:

. . . He (Christ) is the head of His body, the Church; He, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the first place. For it has pleased God the Father that in Him all His fullness should dwell, and that through Him He should reconcile to Himself all things, whether on the earth or in the heavens, making peace through the blood of His cross (*Colas.*, 1: 18-20).

A few sentences later in the same Epistle, Saint Paul writes:

. . . and what is lacking of the sufferings of Christ, I fill up in my flesh for His body, which is the Church. (And later still) Him we preach, admonishing every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus (*ibid.*, 1: 24; 28).

As Saint Thomas indicates in his *Commentary* on this section of the Epistles, the Apostle is able to use such bold and seemingly extreme language for the very reason of his intimate union with Christ the Savior in the Mystical Body. He is one with Christ. But this is as true of each of us, as it was true of Saint Paul. The great Apostle of the Gentiles writes in another place that Christ came that "we might receive the adoption of sons" (*Galat.*, 4:5). Therefore, the true member of His Mystical Body is "a son; and if a son, an heir also through God" (*ibid.*, 4:7).

Now since we are sons and heirs of the same Father through membership in the Mystical Body, we can say with Christ the words He spoke to His Most Blessed Mother and Saint Joseph, when they found Him after three days' search in the Temple, "Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" (*Luke*, 2:49). But the "Father's business" for the laity is the apostolate which they must

exercise, because they are members of the Mystical Christ, or in the beautiful phrase of Saint Augustine, "the whole Christ."

However, we must not ignore the fact that this reality of the identification of the member of the Mystical Christ with the lay apostle can present some difficulties for the fervent Catholic who, because of his station in life, cannot participate in the various organizations that band together to augment the effectiveness of the lay apostolate through concerted group action. To solve these difficulties we must look to the teachings of the Holy Father. Pope Pius XII realized that these difficulties could render the movement of the lay apostolate ineffective, because too many Christians would begin to think of the movement as something for the chosen few, something for heroic souls who would entrust their future and all their energies to organizations engaged in work that would be impossible for the man who must work for the support of his family or spend his time in study in the various colleges and universities, for the woman who must devote her talents to the rearing of children and the making of a good Christian home. And thus, this wise Pontiff emphatically denied that the lay apostolate was something pertaining to the realm of the extraordinary, the esoteric. He once said :

We know . . . that . . . simple fulfillment of a professional duty by millions and millions of conscientious and exemplary faithful is a powerful and irreplaceable factor in the salvation of souls.

Doubtless, the lay apostolate, in its true meaning, is mainly organized in Catholic Action and in other institutions of apostolic activity approved by the Church; but, besides these, there can be and there are lay apostles, men and women, who not only perceive the good to be accomplished, and the possibility and means of doing it, but who do it out of a desire to bring other souls to truth and grace. We have in mind also a great many excellent laymen who, in the countries where the Church is persecuted as she was in the first centuries of Christianity, substitute to the best of their abilities for imprisoned priests, risking even their lives in order to impart the teachings of Christian doctrine, to instruct on religious living and the correct manner of Catholic thinking, to induce others to frequent the Sacraments, especially that of the Eucharist. All of these laymen you see at work; do not worry about asking to what organization they belong; admire, rather, and recognize gratefully the good they accomplish.¹

We have quoted this extract at great length, because it is an indication of how the lay apostolate is to be understood in its fullest sense, according to the mind of the Popes. And only by studying the profound significance of these words can we rid ourselves of what the same Pontiff called "petty exclusivity" regarding the lay apostolate.

This is precisely why an understanding of the Encyclical *Mystici*

Corporis is so important to the lay apostolate. And from this masterful Letter, the lay apostle, knowing who and what he is in the supernatural order, will receive the impetus and the consolation necessary to sustain him in the oftentimes burdensome tasks of daily life.

For nothing more glorious, nothing nobler, nothing surely more honorable can be imagined than to belong to the Holy, Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Church, in which we become members of one Body as venerable as it is unique; are guided by one supreme Head; are filled with one divine Spirit; are nourished during our earthly exile by one doctrine and one heavenly Bread, until at last we enter into the one, unending blessedness of heaven (*Mystici Corporis*, N.C.W.C. trans., p. 35, n. 91).

It may seem odd to some readers that we have quoted at great length the Epistles of Saint Paul and statements of Pope Pius other than *Mystici Corporis*, when our intention was to show the connection between this last-mentioned document and the lay apostolate. But we have done this with a specific purpose in mind. No article, especially one of this length, is an adequate substitution for reading the Encyclical itself. It has been our desire that once the connection between this Letter and the lay apostolate is pointed out, interested Catholics will read, or re-read as the case may be, *Mystici Corporis* from a point of view that may not be immediately apparent in the title of the Encyclical itself. The sometimes arduous, but always rewarding, task of personal investigation accomplishes far more than second-hand discussion could possibly do. And particularly in the matter with which we have been concerned, it is of fundamental importance that personal conviction be strengthened by the pronouncements of the infallible Teacher of Christendom.

In Book Eight of his *Confessions*, Saint Augustine recounts the story; told to him by Simplicianus, of the conversion of the famous Roman rhetorician Victorinus. Having attained an enviable reputation among his pagan contemporaries for the brilliance of his teaching, Victorinus examined the Holy Scriptures and the writings of reputable Christians "most carefully and minutely." After this prolonged and profound study he came to Simplicianus and said: "I would have you know that I am now a Christian." Simplicianus was not so easily convinced, and he retorted: "I shall not believe it nor count you among Christians unless I see you in the Church of Christ." The famous rhetorician was annoyed and gently mocked his friend; "Then is it the walls that make Christians?"

Simplicianus could not be put off with cleverness in expression; he led Victorinus to a true understanding of what membership in the Church really meant, he encouraged him to more profound study and meditation. He persuaded him to seek the truth of that Christian-

ity which *exists*. The result of all this, in the words of the great Augustine, was that Victorinus "grew afraid that Christ might deny him before His angels if he were ashamed to confess Christ before men." And when he finally understood what it meant to be a Christian, he sought Baptism in the Holy Catholic Church. The priests of Rome who received him into the Faith, aware of possible embarrassment to so great a man from the public reception of the Sacrament, offered to let him make his profession of Faith in private.

But he preferred to make profession of salvation in the sight of the congregation in church. For there had been no salvation in the Rhetoric he had taught, yet he had professed it publicly. Obviously, therefore, he should be in less fear of Your meek flock when he was uttering Your word, since he had no fear of the throng of the deluded when uttering his own. When therefore he had gone up to make his profession all those who knew him began whispering his name to one another with congratulatory murmurs. And indeed who there did not know him? And from the lips of the rejoicing congregation sounded the whisper, "Victorinus, Victorinus." They were quick to utter their exultation at seeing him and as quickly fell silent to hear him.²

The moving story of Victorinus is a symbol of the effectiveness of a true lay apostolate. After deep study of what it means to be a Christian, to be sought especially in the Encyclical Letter *Mystici Corporis*, the lay apostle is prepared to make his public confession of Christ Jesus. Victorinus asked in mockery: "Then is it the walls that make Christians?" The lay apostle answers in utter simplicity: "No, but it is Christians that make the walls; it is Christians who make up the Church, Christians who are vital members of the Mystical Body of Christ."

And when in their daily lives the lay apostles of our age, both men and women, show themselves to be vital members of this Mystical Christ, "the whole Christ," by ardent, conscientious, exemplary fidelity to their duties as fathers and mothers; teachers, doctors and lawyers; students and workers—then shall these same apostles hear in their hearts the "congratulatory murmurs" of the congregation of God, whispering: "Christians, Christians." And the angels themselves shall be quick to utter their exultation at seeing these lay apostles and shall as quickly fall silent to hear them. —Marcellus M. Coskren, O.P.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Pope Pius XII, *Address to Lay Apostolate*, Oct. 14, 1951. The translation is that of Michael Chinigo in *The Pope Speaks: The Teachings of Pope Pius XII*, New York, 1957, p. 265. A study of the section of this book entitled "Church and Religion," pp. 199-272, will be of invaluable aid to understanding the nature of the lay apostolate.

² *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. by Frank Sheed, New York, 1943, pp. 158-161.