

THE PROPAGATION OF CATHOLIC TRUTH

BRO. MATTHEW HANLEY, O. P.



HE world needs the Catholic Church. That is patent to anyone who realizes the condition of the world and, at the same time, appreciates the Catholic Church. It was true when the "world" and the "Roman Empire" were practically synonymous. It is equally true today. Now, however large may be the number of those who realize the condition of the world, there are certainly millions who do not appreciate the Church. To bring this multitude to the Church is, in the present state of affairs, quite impossible. To bring the Church to the multitude is not only possible—it is absolutely necessary.

That is the conclusion that has forced itself upon the courageous men and women in various parts of the world who have undertaken the propagation of Catholic truth in what may be generically designated Evidence Movements. Realizing that much of the partisan feeling against the Church has its root in ignorance, they have undertaken to spread broadcast the truth concerning the Church and her doctrines. As the learned Pope Leo XIII has written: "There is nothing so hurtful to Christian wisdom as that it should not be known, since it possesses, when loyally received, inherent power to drive away error."¹ Christ, with the Apostles, did not wait for the Jews to go down to Galilee. He went to Jerusalem and there, in the midst of those who hated Him or did not know Him, He set forth His doctrines simply and clearly. In like manner, these societies or guilds have gone forth and by the printed word or by word of mouth have begun the huge task of dissipating the false conceptions that keep well-meaning people away from the Church.

In thus actively propagating the faith, these laymen are but fulfilling their duty as loyal children of the Church. In his encyclical letter on the duties of Christians as citizens, Pope Leo XIII pointed this out: "The office indeed of the pastors, namely of the bishops, . . . No one, however, must entertain the notion that private individuals are prevented from taking some active part in

¹ Encyclical Letter *Sapientiae Christianae*, January 10, 1890.

this duty of teaching, especially those on whom God has bestowed gifts of mind with the strong wish of rendering themselves useful. . . . In respect consequently to the duties that bind us to God and the Church, it should be borne earnestly in mind that in propagating Christian truth and warding off errors, the zeal of the laity should, as far as possible, be brought actively into play.”²

The organizations which have sprung up since the beginning of the century as an outlet for this activity may be considered in a general way as falling into two classes—those who confine their efforts chiefly to the distribution of literature and those whose principal work is street preaching. The former are, of course, more numerous, for the difficulties attendant upon street preaching call for training and preparation that necessarily restrict the number of those engaged in the work. And yet the good done by both classes of organization is scarcely appreciated by the majority of our people. A brief glance at some of the best known societies may disclose some interesting information.

As to the societies whose aim is the publication and spread of Catholic literature, perhaps the best known outside of our own country is the Catholic Truth Society of England, which has broadcast throughout the English-speaking world hundreds of thousands of books and pamphlets. It has been an invaluable ally of those who have gone out in the open to preach Catholic doctrines. Similar organizations have also been founded on the Continent. Thus in Italy there is the Federation of Catholic Men recently described by our Holy Father Pope Pius XI as a “participation of laymen in the Apostolic ministry of the Church.” France has witnessed the rise of several such societies, among them the Catholic Committee of Religious Defence, which, in addition to publishing pamphlets and leaflets, furnishes a weekly bulletin to some five hundred newspapers; the *Action Populaire*, showering upon the country over a million publications annually; the *Association Catholique de la Jeunesse Francaise*, numbering about 120,000 members engaged in giving lectures, promoting study circles and retreats and innumerable other activities. Belgium and Holland also have their groups of lay apostles, the former the *Action Catholique* and the latter a group of Hebrew-Catholic converts who have also undertaken street preaching. Beginnings have also been made in Australia centering principally about lectures to non-Catholics.

Although many may not realize it, the continent of North Amer-

² *Encyclical Letters of Pope Leo XIII* (New York, 1903), p. 189.

ica has been literally spanned by these societies of laymen. The outstanding ones are the well-known and highly-successful Catholic Truth Guild of Boston, the Catholic Truth Society of Oregon, the Catholic Laymen's League of Georgia, and the Laymen's Apostolate of Winnipeg, Canada. His Grace Archbishop John T. McNicholas, O. P., D. D., has recently established in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati the Bellarmine Society, an organization of Catholic laymen who are to devote themselves to the study of apologetics and the defense of the faith. Of these societies, the Catholic Truth Society of Oregon and the Georgian association are engaged almost exclusively in the work of distributing Catholic literature. The former has been in existence for some four years during which time it has sent out over 500,000 pamphlets and books, and, if we include Catholic papers sent to non-Catholics and advertisements and articles in the secular press, the number reaches the amazing total of more than twenty millions.³

The Laymen's League of Georgia was founded in 1916 on the initiative of the late Right Rev. Benjamin J. Keiley, D. D., then Bishop of Savannah. Before it had been in existence two years, it could point with pride to its achievements in opposing anti-Catholic propaganda in Georgia, principally by means of the press, and since that time, its influence has extended into the other states of the south.

Interesting as these records are, the work of the men and women engaged in street preaching has even greater attractions. Personal contact with those for whom they labor is at once an added advantage and a cause for greater concern. Although street preaching has admittedly done much good, it has met opposition. There are not wanting non-Catholics who view with alarm such an undertaking, assuming that it is but another attempt to foist the "Romish Church" on unsuspecting by-standers. Catholics, too, there are, who fearful for the dignity of the Church and of Catholic truth, hesitate to approve what, to their minds, is an unnecessary, not to say hazardous method of bringing souls to Christ. They feel that to take Catholic doctrine into the streets and parks is to expose it to ridicule and even blasphemy. On the other hand, it has received the approbation and whole-hearted support of not a few distinguished prelates including His Eminence the Cardinal-Archbishop of Boston, under whose auspices the Catholic Truth Guild was founded, His Eminence Adrian Cardinal Gasquet, who, in approving the work of the Catholic Evidence Guild, said: "I have the sure hope and belief that this form of

³ Fourth Annual Report, January, 1927.

lay apostleship will, within a few years, be found in all Christian countries. It is necessary, absolutely necessary, if the word of God is to reach the multitudes . . . that it be preached to them in the highways and by-ways of our great cities; and as they will not come to us, we must go to them." Many bishops in the United States, in welcoming the members of the Catholic Truth Guild, have voiced their approval of this apostolate of the laity

The outdoor missionary effort is reasonable because of its success and certainly it has succeeded. As early as 1877, a street preaching movement was begun in England by Father Philip Fletcher and Mr. Lister Drummond, K. C., who founded the Guild of Ransom. Rapid strides had been made when the work was interrupted by the World War. The Guild has since been revived, but in Southwark where it was first organized, it has recently become allied with a younger organization—the Catholic Evidence Guild. A brief survey of this latter group of lay missionaries, its methods and its work will give a clear idea of what street preaching really means.⁴

The geographical aspect of the world was not the only thing that underwent a change during the eventful years 1914-1918. Among other things, many came to look upon Roman Catholics in an entirely different light. Catholic chaplains were to a great extent the outstanding causes of this change of heart, at least among men who had been in service. For those at home, many reasons might be given. At any rate, the changed attitude was evident, but how to take advantage of it was a problem. In England, the Catholic Evidence Guild was the answer. Founded in 1918, it was looked upon as more or less of an experiment. Happily, it has not only justified itself but it has won the approbation of almost all the bishops of England.

The Guild is essentially an organization of laymen, a movement in which laymen are to take the chief part. However it is under the guidance of ecclesiastical authority for the work depends in great measure upon the initiative of the local ordinaries. Then, too, no one is permitted to mount a Guild platform until he has successfully passed an examination before a board appointed by the bishop and composed usually of two or three priests and a layman who has had experience in the actual work.

Many of those who hesitate to approve such an undertaking by

⁴ We are indebted to Father John Baptist Reeves, O. P., for information concerning the Catholic Evidence Guild. Fr. Reeves and other English Dominicans, notably Fr. Hugh Pope, Fr. Vincent McNabb, and Fr. Bede Jarrett, have done much to further the work.

laymen, even under the supervision of the clergy, are convinced that it is almost impossible to find competent men and women in numbers sufficient to carry on the work, and certainly the providing of speakers has been the big problem for the Guild. Everyone admits that street preaching is not a mere pastime. It entails work and preparation and therefore sacrifice on the part of those who aspire to a speaker's license. And yet there are in England thousands of men and women devoting three evenings each week to study classes and lectures, in addition to the time spent in preparation for these classes and in private reading and study.

The necessity of the classes is apparent when we consider the nature of the work and the almost complete lack of preparation on the part of the volunteers. The time allotted to class is taken up with a lecture by the instructor, followed by a period of questioning by the instructor, and finally, a period for questions from the students. The main object is to give the men and women practice in speaking as often as possible and the growth of the Guild indicates that the classes are achieving their object.

In thus sacrificing time and leisure, these zealous laymen are not only bringing light to others; they are also strengthening their own faith. As Father Reeves has written: "They quickly develop a real love for the unbeliever and simultaneously an equal love for Catholic truth and an insatiable desire to know more and more of it. Following this, the desire to live it more perfectly becomes more and more intense and practical." Surely an effect in itself worth the effort.

As the Christians of old thrilled and inspired the crowds in the Coliseum and aroused in them respect and even love for the faith that produced such sane, heroic men and women, the members of the Guild achieve a like effect by word and example in their modern Coliseum—Hyde Park in London—where each Sunday afternoon the Guild platform is set up beside those of Atheists, Communists, and all sorts of sectarians. From noon until dark, the members of the group of speakers assigned in turn address the crowd assembled, some out of curiosity, some with more worthy motives. They come to listen and, what is more important, they stay to listen and to ask questions.

Aside from those few individuals who, by reason of experience or ability or both, are permitted to choose their own subjects and, in great part, to follow their own methods, there are two classes of speakers. The first is composed of those who are limited to a par-

ticular subject or group of subjects, beyond which they may not go even during the ever-popular question time. Should any of the crowd ask a question which does not come under his subject, the speaker must frankly admit that he must leave the question for another speaker or allow the chairman to deal with the questioner. These chairmen form the second class of speakers. They have a general license, that is, without restriction as to subject. At each meeting there must be one of these present to intervene should the limits imposed on the speaker prove a source of difficulty. The talks are delivered in a plain, simple manner suited to the ordinary man of the street for, after all, it is not so much technical theology that is wanted, but a straight-forward explanation from the point of view of a layman.

Such in brief is the working of the Catholic Evidence Guild. Whatever may be said of it, the fact stands that good is resulting from the efforts of these zealous laymen. If it is true that "since the war the number of converts in England averages twelve thousand annually," surely the labor is not in vain.

Americans who favor this lay apostolate may derive some satisfaction from the knowledge that the revival of street preaching started in our own country a year before the Evidence Guild was organized. In most of our cities, the "soap-box" has long since become a familiar sight. From its Delphian height, the oracles of Socialism, religious theories, political fads and all sorts of pet fancies propound their doctrines. There is no good reason why those who alone have the truth that leads to life should not go out in the open and proclaim it to the well-meaning people of America. David Goldstein and Martha Moore Avery, both of whom had been stout champions of Socialism before their entrance into the Church, realized this and became the leaders in the organization of the Catholic Truth Guild of Boston which is now in its eleventh season of successful street preaching. The Guild was officially established on July 1, 1917, and on July 4, the first meeting was held on Boston Common. The special van which had been built for the Guild, a combination motor car and rostrum, was blessed by His Eminence William Cardinal O'Connell and sent forth "to make the Catholic Church better known and loved." Since its inception, the Guild has conducted meetings in Boston similar to those held in England by the Evidence Guild and, in addition, the tireless leaders have toured the country spreading broadcast the truths of Christ and His Church. The year after the Guild was founded, the now-famous van was taken on a

transcontinental tour. On the Pacific coast the welcome from ecclesiastics as well as laymen was no less enthusiastic than it had been in the East. The founders themselves testify to opposition encountered throughout the country, but experience and a more intimate knowledge of the work banished it and today the Catholic Truth Guild stands forth as a powerful champion of truth, with a record that should inspire confidence in its mission and cooperation in its work.

Another successful attempt at street preaching on this continent was made in Canada during the summer of 1926 when a Paulist Father from the United States spent four months in Manitoba where he was assisted by the Laymen's Apostolate of Winnipeg. The men had been in training for the work for about two years, and while it may be doubted that the methods used in the campaign would be effective or favorably received in our cities even by our own people, the results were satisfactory and were but another demonstration that street preaching is not only possible, but that it has already been tried and found successful.

Separating the work of street preaching from the glamor and excitement of actually facing a crowd, it is evident that almost heroic effort and a great deal of time are required for the work of preparation. Granting that street preaching is necessary, a successful attempt at it will demand real, solid work and unflagging zeal on the part of those concerned. Many far-seeing men believe that the time will come, if it is not already here, when Catholic truth must be carried to the people out in the open. Thus far all agree. The difference of opinion is encountered when the next step is reached, namely, who is going to do it, clerics or laymen? If laymen are to enter the lists as champions of the Church, it is evident that they must be prepared and prepared thoroughly. The training of speakers will be the first and perhaps the greatest problem. As we have seen, study clubs or study circles have been the means adopted where the lay apostolate has been undertaken. The Guild of Ransom, the Catholic Evidence Guild, the Catholic Truth Guild, all, from their foundation have given much time and labor to the formation of these clubs. In Belgium, study circles have been in existence since 1910 and today a veritable network of them extends over the land, not so much for street preaching as to insure an educated Catholic laity.

In the United States, the National Catholic Welfare Conference has fostered the study club plan. The work was begun in 1921 and during the past six years, contacts have been made with some five

hundred organizations throughout the country. The methods are very much like those used in Europe and the aim is not preparation for an active lay apostolate, but rather the education of the Catholic layman that he may be a better Catholic and a better citizen.⁵ However, should the street preaching movement expand here as it has elsewhere, may we not look to these study clubs as a foundation upon which to build? From them will come zealous men and women thoroughly instructed in their faith, eager and well-prepared to go out into the highways and by-ways to combat error and ignorance in the cause of Catholic truth.

⁵ The purpose, method and organization of study clubs are concisely set forth in a booklet published by the National Catholic Welfare Conference entitled *How to Conduct a Study Club*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Goldstein-Avery, *Campaigning for Christ* (Boston, 1924).
Henry Brown, S. J., *The Catholic Evidence Movement* (London, 1921).
Denis Gwynn, *Catholic Reaction in France* (New York, 1924).
Analecta, O. P., XVII, 733.
Action Catholique, *Cercles d'Etudes* (Brussels, 1911).
Hugh Pope, O. P., "The Modern Apostolate" *American Ecclesiastical Review* LXI (1919) No. 2, 125 ff.

