

AGE OF THE LAITY

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ALTHOUGH from the time of her founding the Church has remained unchanged in the essentials, in every age she has shown a striking, if accidental, adaptability to the needs of the times. This characteristic vitality gives the Church her unconquerable spirit, developing ever new weapons with which to fight prevalent dangers. Sometimes her defenses are the result of direct divine intervention. More often they are the product of human activity, either individual or group. Thus the history of the Church records the emergence of the Age of Faith, the period of the Crusades, and the Counter-Reformation.

Today new dangers beset the Church; secularism, materialism and liberalism threaten in fact to corrupt and destroy all of society itself. Yet today there are men forming new organizations, unleashing new movements to combat these social evils. Catholic Action and the Lay Apostolate, the Liturgical Movement, Lay Missionary Societies and the Secular Institutes are a few of the organizations that come readily to mind. When one recalls that Secular Institutes are primarily for the laity, and that the Liturgical Movement as we know it today is chiefly marked by its pastoral element, the liturgy as it is the people's prayer, it is readily apparent that the layman is the common denominator of all. This article is an attempt to acquaint the reader with some of the essentials of only one of these new lay phenomena, Catholic Action, although it also touches on two of the others as they are related to it.

CATHOLIC ACTION

To obtain a clear picture of Catholic Action is difficult because it is not just one organization, but a whole host of them,

each with its own distinctive form of government. It has been defined by Pope Pius XI as "the participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy," but this will not throw too much light on the subject until we have first seen the "why" of Catholic Action.

Atheistic materialism and secularism in driving God from society, succeeded in removing as well the foundation stone for moral living, since only personal responsibility to God for all man's actions can push an individual along the path of virtue. Human convention and custom alone are not sufficient. When the secularists excluded God from education, children were deprived of the very knowledge of life's purpose and the incentive necessary to fulfill their obligations in school.¹ When God was taken out of the factory, labor relations were no longer stabilized by their ultimate foundation in God; employers inflicted unjust demands, and workers, in their turn, failed to fulfill obligations to employers. To restore this Godless society and consecrate it to God anew, Catholic Action was born.

The question might well be asked, why can't the Church reform society utilizing the hierarchical organization it already has at hand? There are two answers to this question, both of which are based on the new social structure of our age. In earlier times the hierarchy influenced society directly: Bishops and cardinals were advisers to governments and kings, or actually directed government offices; priests and religious did almost all of the teaching; and the parish priest was at the center of community life. With a higher percentage of priests per unit of the faithful, the priest could know his parishioners intimately, know the work they were doing, their family problems and their social activities.

Today this is impossible. Big factories and plants are communities in themselves. Many large companies run an array of organizations such as ball clubs, bowling clubs and bridge clubs. They foster growth of a company community by promoting those men and women who are on intimate personal terms with the executives and directors. How can a priest influence such a community to which he has no access? How can he form and implement programs for the improvement of education if he can only teach the children once a week, and then outside the school building? How can he find out about the families in his parish if they attend only social affairs, dinners and outings to which he is not even invited?

The Church has realized the vastness of this gulf separating it from its field of operation, and from this realization has come Catholic Action which is now bringing Christian values and Christian morality back into society. Lay apostles—that is laymen acting as other bishops, other priests—are moving into the factory, the company community, the non-parish social gathering, and exerting the good influence that priests did of old.

The second answer arises out of the very nature of the layman as layman. It is true that the historical situation has sharply delineated the layman's role in the present crisis, but, abstracting from the contingencies of time and place, we see that this is essentially the layman's role in the Church in every age. To be apostolic, to spread the faith and to be educated in it, to find Christ in every one of the acts he performs throughout the day, these are the layman's obligations in all ages. It is, perhaps, only in our time, with the advent of democracy, universal education and leisure time for all classes that the role has so clearly appeared.²

That it is primarily the task of the layman, and no one else, to give the industrial world a structure that is Christian, to make Christ truly Lord of the entertainment industry, medicine, psychiatry, welfare agencies and the press, can be seen from a recent address of the Holy Father, Pope Pius XII:

The nature of the relations between the Church and the world demands the intervention of lay apostles. The consecration of the world is, in its essentials, the work of laymen. . . . The groups of active Catholics that must be formed in every factory and every workshop . . . can be composed only of the workers themselves.³

This consecration of the world belongs to the temporal order, which is the sphere strictly proper to the laity, whereas the spiritual order is proper to the hierarchy and the priests. Lest there be any misunderstanding as to the use of "temporal" as opposed to "spiritual" here, it might be well to close this section with a statement from the Congress of the Layman on the role of the laity:

The laity in the Church works to promote in the world conditions of temporal life suitable to facilitate the Church's redemptory mission, thus realizing God's intention to establish all in Christ.⁴

THE FORMS OF CATHOLIC ACTION

The basic unit of Catholic Action is the cell. These small groups of men and women, meeting once a week, some with their

own officers presiding, but always under the supervision of a priest appointed by the bishop, lay the plans for the action that each individual is to pursue, whether it is patching up a bad marriage, or introducing a new integrated sports program in an area of racial prejudice.

It must always be remembered that this apostolate is a part of the hierarchy's apostolate. Even though the cells are part of a diocesan, national, or even international organization with lay directors at its head, these directors follow the plans the hierarchy has laid down, the ends and means which the hierarchy has determined. One author has summed up the direction of Catholic Action by saying that although there are two directives, one is on the theoretical and higher plane where principles and standards are concerned and belongs to the hierarchy as the sole guardian and teacher of Christian doctrine, whereas the other, the subordinate direction, is on the practical and executive plane and belongs to the lay directors.⁵

The names of the organizations, usually given in abbreviations, YCS, CYO, CLA, CFM, YCW, CIC,* etc., are as numerous as those in a Pentagon directory. The Catholic Interracial Council, to give an example of the kind of work these groups do, has done much to break down the barriers of prejudice and misunderstanding through programs of education in the Chicago area, traditionally a center of racial tension. In St. Louis it has made it possible for white and colored children to play together in competitive sports, to attend the same universities, and now, in some cases, the same schools. Their work is helping to pave the way for complete integration.

The Legion of Mary, on the other hand, is a worldwide organization with a variety of activities that includes visiting hospitals and poor homes, searching out fallen away Catholics, assisting the pastor in the parish census or in his convert work, and in disseminating literature through parish lending libraries and pamphlet racks.

The laws regulating Catholic Action groups emphasize the fact that the sanctification of the individual apostle must come first. They do this in a number of ways. Some groups require their members to say certain daily prayers. The Legion of Mary begins its meetings with the Rosary, spiritual reading, and an

* Young Christian Students, Catholic Youth Organization, Catholic Labor Alliance, Christian Family Movement, Young Christian Workers, and the Catholic Interracial Council.

exhortation by the priest-director.⁶ The Christian Family Movement and the Young Christian Workers begin theirs by studying and discussing a passage of the Gospels and a part of the Mass.⁷ The social inquiry which follows next in these groups flows right out of the prayers and study. Some groups emphasize a particular devotion, as the Legion, which bases the spiritual life of its members upon the devotion to the Blessed Mother as taught by St. Louis Grignon de Montfort. All of them stress that a fuller and more active participation in the Church's liturgy is the true origin, not only of the member's sanctification, but of his whole apostolate.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE LITURGICAL MOVEMENT TO CATHOLIC ACTION

The liturgical movement as we know it today is pastoral. Liturgists are not primarily interested in restoring the chant to its true form by correcting the Gregorian notation and by attending to its perfect execution in monastic and cathedral choirs. Their main interest is in the liturgy as it can revive popular, traditional piety and religious fervor among the people.⁸

The former interest was most important to the movement in its beginnings in France when Dom Guéranger labored at Solesmes to restore the life of liturgical prayer among the religious. Since Pius X, however, the emphasis has shifted to restoring the life of liturgical prayer to the people. It was this saint who said: "We must not sing or pray during the Mass, but we must sing and pray the Mass."⁹ Not content with only urging the people to "active participation in the most holy mysteries and in the public and solemn prayers of the Church,"¹⁰ he introduced reforms in liturgical law to this end, the most important of which were the invitation to all to receive Communion frequently, and the lowering of the age requirements for First Communion. Subsequent pontiffs have added to this legislation, and today Pope Pius XII has gone beyond his predecessors in reforming the liturgy and making the liturgical apostolate a truly pastoral-liturgical apostolate. Permission for evening Masses, new fasting regulations that make it convenient for working people to receive the most Blessed Sacrament, a restored Holy Week Liturgy, new feasts as that of St. Joseph the Worker, the encyclical *Mediator Dei*, on the liturgy and permission to administer the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation in

the vernacular are frequently cited as evidence of his efforts in this direction.

The Popes and the liturgists have not been the only ones active in this field. Beginning with Dom Lambert Beauduin in Belgium, first the priests, and then through them the laity, were brought into the apostolate,¹¹ so that today the plans of the Popes are meeting a greater and wider response. National liturgical congresses, liturgical retreats for priests and laymen, liturgical presses, liturgical hymnals, the use of the vernacular hand missal, and the growing popularity of the Dialogue Mass, all point today to the fact that the liturgy is becoming the prayer of the whole mystical body.

Catholic Action is closely related to the liturgical movement as the source of all its strength and the end of all its activity. It is significant that Pius X pleaded for active lay participation in the liturgy and Pius XI urged the laity to active participation in Catholic Action. Only when a large part of the laity began to be instructed in the great truths of the faith and to draw down upon themselves more abundant graces by a closer association with the sacraments and the liturgy, did they come to realize their apostolic obligations, and, at the same time, to possess the zeal and enthusiasm necessary for the fulfillment of these obligations.

This close association between the two movements can easily be seen in the history of American Catholic Action. Some of the most active promoters of the liturgical movement are members of the lay apostolate. They may study the Mass at their meetings, or help the pastor inaugurate the congregational sung Mass, or see to it that the teaching of the liturgy is carried out in our schools. Some Catholic Action groups publicize the movement in articles and columns in their magazines and papers. The Friendship House movement and the National Catholic Rural Life Conference openly acknowledge that the liturgical apostolate is at the heart of their work.¹²

The restored society is restored in Christ. The end of the Church and the ultimate end of all the Catholic Action organizations is to bring all men individually,

into vital contact with the Sacrifice of the Cross, so that the merits, which flow from it, should be imparted to them . . . (The Mass) is, as it were, the supreme instrument whereby merits won by the Divine Redeemer on the Cross are distributed to the faithful.¹³

One of the ways, then, that Catholic Action can attain its end,

is to further the liturgical apostolate, for the latter's primary aim is to open up a number of new ways for the laity to reach that selfsame Sacrifice of the Cross.

SECULAR INSTITUTES — A STATE OF PERFECTION FOR CATHOLIC ACTION

The mid-twentieth century has witnessed the meeting and mutual fructification of two outgrowths of the Church's apostolate. Although the larger of the two in point of numbers is Catholic Action, which began during the pontificate of Pius XI, the Secular Institutes, dating back to the French Revolution, have a longer history. The former is purely a lay organization while the latter are the latest development in the history of monasticism. The trend of religious in the first twelve centuries of the Church was away from the world into the cloister, but since the time of St. Dominic it has been just the opposite. The Dominicans were the first to leave the enclosure for the active apostolate, although they kept up all the monastic observances and the solemn vows. Congregations starting several centuries later gave up these observances, and still later the Societies of the Common Life gave up the taking of public vows. The Secular Institutes have given up even the common life, and yet they are still "properly numbered among the states of perfection which are juridically constituted and recognized by the Church,"¹⁴ because they have kept the private vow. All the members make "profession before God of celibacy and perfect chastity . . . confirmed by vow, oath or consecration binding in conscience. . . ." ¹⁵ and vow or promise obedience and poverty.

Why has the Church so extended the state of perfection to include those who live in the world without the safeguards of community life, who must shoulder the full burden of providing for all their material wants themselves, and who at the same time do not have the benefit of a religious habit to remind them and all whom they meet of their special vocation? The answer lies in the demands that our times are making on the apostolic life. They require someone to bring Christian example to workers and intellectuals for whom a priest no longer exists, or by whom he is even detested. They demand that someone minister to the poor and needy whom official Catholic charities cannot help. They beg for someone to teach children about God and the natural law in schools where God's existence and law are not known.

Or what of the factory? Could the traditional religious enter there, and try to become one with the workers? Remember that his life and interests, for the most part, are centered in his religious community. His distinctive garb, moreover, makes him a man apart, symbol of a remote and foreign world. Such a religious, sad to say, would probably not strike that needed spark of sympathy among the working masses. Yet those who were engaged in this apostolic work wanted to dedicate their lives to it, and at the same time to acquire perfection in sanctity by the life of the vows in an institute recognized by the Church. Out of this need and desire began the gradual growth of the forerunners of what have since become known as Secular Institutes. They appeared first during the French Revolution, when the inhabitants of convents were forced to practice their religion in the world, and then in ever greater numbers down to and into the years that have witnessed the birth and growth of the lay apostolate.

It was only natural that the two groups, sharing the same activity—Catholic Action and the Secular Institute—would collide, but, fortunately, the outcome was advantageous to both. The Institutes started to grow, and, because of their new importance, began to receive attention from the Church, attention that they had long sought to attract. They sought clarification of the laws regarding their status: Did they come under the Canons for religious in the Code, or were their members laymen? The Holy See, by the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia*, formally recognized them, as experiments, in 1947, and promulgated a special law for their government. It both established a procedure whereby Institutes could be approved, and set up a place for them under a law that was outside the statutes of the Canon Law—which governs the religious life strictly so called—but yet above the lay state. In the following six years, 130 institutions applied for approval, of which eleven had been approved by 1954.¹⁶

Catholic Action has stimulated the growth of the Secular Institutes, particularly since a *Motu Proprio* of 1948 stated that the leaders of Catholic Action should promote vocations to the Institutes and help them whenever their own internal government permits.¹⁷ At the same time, Catholic Action, too, has benefited immensely from the collision, and this mainly by the example of the men and women in the Institutes, who, drawing from the graces that are theirs by reason of their consecration, can and do set the standards of Christian lay living in a pagan world for

Catholic Action workers who are searching for that very thing. The new legislation suggests that this is the way they should help the lay apostolate: Their members can be guides by

giving to the other faithful, who see and observe them, an outstanding example of self-denying, humble and constant collaboration with the Hierarchy.¹⁸

The Secular Institutes can also furnish leaders for Catholic Action. Lay leadership at times suffers from a lack of inspiration and zeal. For priests to supply all the deficiencies is most difficult, but members of the many Institutes, whose regulations require them to take an active part in at least one Catholic Action organization, are already on the spot and can supply the needed inspiration and direction.

CONCLUSION

That which has the Holy Ghost for its teacher has all truth, and truth cannot change. So it is that the Church remains immutable throughout time. But just as any organization adapts itself to conquer a disease that threatens, so the Mystical Body changes accidentally in acquiring new skills to subdue those who would destroy her. The task of restoring a fallen society and consecrating it to God is the biggest task of the Church today. We have seen how she has met this problem with Catholic Action, an organized apostolate of the laity acting in union with the hierarchy, an apostolate that is nourished by a close association with Christ in the Mass that was made possible by the liturgical apostolate born twenty years earlier. We have also seen how room has been made for certain members of this apostolate, within the state of perfection in the new Secular Institutes.

That this lay activity is setting the unique stamp of the Church's spirit in our times it is difficult to say with certainty. The ultimate decision must be left to the historian who has a perspective that only the lapse of a long period of time can give. To many who view the struggle from a less advantageous position, however, this is indeed the "Age of the Laity."

¹ *Secularism: A Statement* Issued November 14, 1947 by the Bishops of the United States, N.C.W.C. edition, pp. 4-5.

² Louis J. Putz, C.S.C., *The Modern Apostle*, Fides, Chicago, 1957, p. 5.

³ Pius XII, "Address to the Second Congress of the Lay Apostolate," Rome, October, 1957.

⁴ J. M. Perrin, O.P., *Forward the Layman*, Newman, Westminster, Maryland, 1956, p. 23.

⁵ Luigi Civardi, *A Manual of Catholic Action*, translated by C. C. Martindale, S.J., Sheed and Ward, New York, 1935, p. 149.

⁶ *Official Handbook of the Legion of Mary*, Second American Edition, 1941, pp. 178-184.

⁷ J. E. Haley, C.S.C., Editor, *Apostolic Sanctity in the World*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1957, p. 13.

⁸ Gaetano Cardinal Cicognani, *Opening Address, The Assisi Papers*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, p. 6.

⁹ Olivier Rousseau, O.S.B., *The Progress of the Liturgy*, Newman, Westminster, Maryland, 1951, p. 152.

¹⁰ Pius X, *Motu Proprio, Trale Sollecitudini*, November 22, 1903.

¹¹ Olivier Rousseau, *op. cit.*, pp. 162-170.

¹² Louis J. Putz, C.S.C., Editor, *The Catholic Church, U.S.A.*, Fides, Chicago, 1956, pp. 311-312.

¹³ Pius XII, *Mediator Dei*, N.C.W.C. translation, nn. 77, 79.

¹⁴ Pius XII, *Motu Proprio, Primo feliciter*, March 12, 1948, n. V.

¹⁵ Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution, *Provida Mater Ecclesia*, February 2, 1947, Art. III, Clause 2, 1°

¹⁶ J. E. Haley, C.S.C., Editor, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

¹⁷ Pius XII, *Motu Proprio, Primo feliciter*, March 12, 1948, n. VI.

¹⁸ Instruction of the Sacred Congregation for Religious, *Cum Sanctissimus*, March 19, 1948, par. 10.

