



Photo by Edward Lettau

*"The joys and the hopes,  
the griefs and the anxieties  
of the men of this age,  
especially those who are poor  
or in any way afflicted,*

*these are the joys and hopes,  
the griefs and anxieties  
of the followers of Christ. . . .”*



# **Community Organization and Christian Action**

**Cyril D. Tyson**

EDITOR'S NOTE: Mr. Tyson is Deputy Administrator for Community Relations, Human Resources Administration, New York City. The following article represents his contribution to the workshop on "The Church in the Modern City" held in Jersey City in December, 1966. We invite the comments of our readers concerning this article.

We are all living in exciting times, when terms like "community organization," "community action" and "social action" tend to be euphemisms for the stimulation of people and groups into new directions of democratic involvement. In order to understand the new forces that have been set in motion, one must have a perspective and understanding of their beginnings.

It wasn't too long ago—perhaps ten to fifteen years—when community organization, as a course in schools of social work, provided students with an understanding of fund raising and the structure of city-wide private social agency programs which secured their representation from more local community groups, mostly private, and represented generic social service interests. In all cases, one dealt with the so-called “leadership” that developed through these more structured agency systems—parent associations, members of the boards of settlement houses and other similar agencies, and leaders in civic affairs groups. In any case, this generally constituted community organization structure and procedure. Only on the rarest of occasions were individuals directly affected by the service that these organizations provided participants in developing the plans or policy relative to the goals of the organization in its program direction. More recently many of us have come to recognize that such previous approaches—while highly motivated and philanthropic in nature—did not necessarily insure the relevance of the program to the people it purported to serve. In addition, there were many of us who raised basic questions concerning participation of the people affected as an additional tool in the expansion of the democratic process which for too long had eluded those who were poor and alienated, and most likely to be served through the social service process. Of course, this pattern also affected other areas of institutional life, including the political, economic and religious institutions.

I think the turning point in this previous approach occurred partially as a result of the knowledge gained through our AID (Agency for International Development) program in underdeveloped nations. It was here, for example, that we learned that working directly with individuals in communities with a high degree of social pathology could produce skill development in order to affect changes in their own lives. We also learned through the juvenile delinquency studies funded through the President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Crime, which was created in 1962 through the Juvenile Delinquency Prevention and Control Act, that social action was a crucial weapon in securing full participation of the youth and adults in the life of their community. We have seen the tremendous success of the Peace Corps program, which is predicated on really helping people in underdeveloped countries to help themselves. Finally, the undergirding for this new approach has been the great Civil Rights

movement; starting with the Supreme Court decision on school desegregation, the Freedom Rides and the sit-ins, and the programmatic involvement of people in direct passive action to bring about social, political, and economic equity.

The community organizations created to give local impetus to this activity were entirely different from the old traditional program structures. This is not to say that in the broad field of social work—particularly in groupwork theory—that the goal was not to be an “enabler” and to help people to help themselves. It is simply a fact that in programmatic terms this goal did not always materialize. I think then that we ought to look more closely at the implications of this new thrust and separate various ingredients so that we might understand its full significance.

What comes through as the dust now settles is that there are a number of levels of community action, and these levels are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Furthermore, they must be understood in order to see their inter-relationship and the role of the religious community in general and the Catholic community specifically.

The anti-poverty program has institutionalized the concept of “maximum feasible participation” of the members of the groups to be served. In operational terms, this means the participation of recipients of services—participation on planning committees, on policy boards, and as staff and administrators in the implementation of programs that affect their lives. This represents one form of community action—a new kind of community organization construct.

The mobilization of the various resources of a community by the affected people in the community in an interlocking distributive pattern of services on a local level represents another form of community action.

Finally, the participation in policy and planning in existing traditional agencies and programs provides the opportunity for the re-direction of energies and resources. The development of programs consonant with the needs of the community, and the interlocking of older institutional systems with the new community-based agencies and organizations, represents another level of community action.

The effect of these approaches is to heighten involvement in what some call “participatory democracy” and to make more possible the development in individuals—particularly the poor—of the tools, techniques and the methodology to affect the shaping of their lives so they can be full participants in the democratic society.

The Ecumenical Council has provided Catholics with an opportunity to effectively participate in this new order of community organization and social action. While there has been heightened involvement of Catholics—both lay and clergy—in civil rights and anti-poverty programs, the full involvement up and down the hierarchical structure was not possible until we came to grips with the redefinition of the relationship between the laity and the clergy. The position flowing from the sessions on lay-clergy relations in the Council makes it possible through such redefinition for the laity to participate in a more creative and leadership role on church matters, and consequently, with confidence participate more fully in the social-issue life of their community. Similar activity has occurred among other religions and Christian denominations. What then is the practical effect of this thrust? The practical effect is the expanded participation on the part of the laity and the clergy in all of the social issues that affect their constituents—be they migrant worker problems in California, open housing in Chicago, the problems of poverty in Appalachia, or the securing of civil rights and the elimination of poverty and the up-grading of employment for minorities throughout the country. This means that the clergy must support the laity's participation in activities designed to positively change the social order, and that the clergy must bear witness to this, through the relevance of the Sunday Gospel and Epistle. In addition, there must be direct involvement of the clergy in community action programs where it is judicious and relevant.

We must, however, begin to affect church institutional change in order to be consistent with our overall responsibility to meet changing social, economic and political needs. The following are questions that I have raised at various conferences that ought to stimulate dialogue among and between appropriate individuals and groups responsible for this projected order of institutional change.

### **Parochial Schools**

First, *ought there be an examination of the Catholic commitment to education in primary institutions?* Most of us are aware of the history of Catholic primary school education in America, and why at a certain point in history such educational institutions met a real need. Today, particularly in the urban centers and in the suburbs,

such schools are not only no longer needed, but, in fact, are a financial drain on the Catholic community, and in some instances abet the exodus of Caucasians from the public school system because of their objections to desegregation.

I am not saying at this point that all primary educational institutions under Catholic sponsorship ought to be relinquished. I can envision, particularly in a number of our Southern communities, a need for the maintenance of such institutions for some time to come. However, no information has come to my attention that supports the thesis that a Catholic school primary education is a necessity in order to strengthen the child's belief in Catholicism and his role in the life of the Church. There is no hard data that shows that a child who attends public school is less a Catholic than one who attends parochial school. There is no data that indicates that the parochial school child is better educated. There are some educators who feel that the elementary parochial school child is slightly advanced in his rote capacity, but this cannot be equated with conceptual ability or intellect. A recent Catholic school study found that only 51% of the teachers in such schools had a Bachelor's degree. Of all lay women teachers in such schools, only 31.6% had a Bachelor's degree. It is difficult to envision quality education occurring where nearly half of the faculty in these elementary schools are not qualified. This poses an interesting question for a Negro who has dealt with boards of education in the public schools. In our public school systems, only those who are certified can teach. In general, a Bachelor's degree is the minimum for certification. In fact, new regulations covering the New York City school system require a minimum of thirty (30) graduate credits above the Bachelor's degree in order to qualify for a Regular license. If both parochial and public school systems are to be deemed equally competent, then the need to re-examine parochial and public school education, their standards and pedagogy, is crucial.

In any case, if one would accept that the parochial elementary school educates as well as the public school, this is not sufficient reason for the Church to utilize its fiscal resources in the maintenance of a dual educational system. These resources could be redirected to programs that would come to grips with the poverty in our community.

Added to this complex problem is an increased feeling on the part of the teaching Sisters that they are being exploited and that the

skills that they have to impart in Catholic religious teachings can best be utilized through Christian community-based organizational structures, rather than through the schools. I am suggesting then that our dialogue include the possibility of either selling or leasing the parochial elementary schools to the local Boards of Education. Whether they are sold or leased, thought should be given to setting up private community corporations of the poor which might economically benefit from either process.

In order to fully achieve the ends I have in mind, it will also be necessary for Catholics to support legislation that would make it possible for Religious of all faiths to teach other than religious subject matter in our public school systems. There is no reason why a person who is qualified to teach Math, or English, or Social Studies ought not to be able to provide such services in the public schools. In addition, there is much to gain in educational as well as human terms from the integration of Religious and non-Religious faculty of all beliefs or non-beliefs within a public school setting.

I am not at the moment addressing myself to the peculiarly private school or private parochial school, non-diocesan in affiliation, that are available to youth from the affluent sector of our society. I am concerned about the parishes that are attempting to provide education and impart religious beliefs through the local parochial school.

## **Church Wealth**

My second question is *whether it is not time for the Church to evaluate the use to which it puts its wealth*. If I recall correctly, Christ was poor. The establishment of the Church as an institution was not in physical terms, but in its definition of attitudes, beliefs, patterns of behavior, and those elements of a cultural heritage that are humanistic. In this sense, He institutionalized a way of life. This was done prior to the development of extended physical facilities, and the need to put a physical structure around elements of institutional life that are human by nature. Today the Church has enormous capital wealth. It is time to assess the need for such wealth in this way, and to what better uses we might put our time and our energies. The National Catholic Conference on Interracial Justice has developed a program called "Project Equality," which is in operation in a num-



ber of dioceses throughout the country. As most of you are aware, this program is an attempt to redirect the purchasing power of the Church in a way in which it supports the equal employment opportunity goals of the President's Committee on Equal Opportunity. It is a clear recognition that the Church, through intelligent use of its wealth, can positively affect the employment of minority group individuals who traditionally have faced discrimination. However, I am not sure that this is sufficient, even though we have just begun in this area. Until the larger society is prepared to deal equitably with our poverty communities, it might be necessary to foster the development of community-owned profit-making businesses. This could be done in conjunction with local anti-poverty programs. The Church could then redirect its purchasing power to those businesses which could also serve the varied anti-poverty programs, and other private social service institutions. These communities need more than jobs. Many of them, like small countries, need stable economic growth, which must include the development of a capacity to absorb business acumen and have it work for the benefit of the community. Towards this end, the possibility of the poor owning shares in such ventures ought to be explored. There is so much that can be done by merely redirecting the Church's resources, both fiscal and human, in the proper direction.

These are just examples of the possibilities of institutional community action that the Church might consider. Community organization and social action at this point in history demands a new order of dialogue in order to effect positive Christian action. It is not just a mere extension of liberality and humanistic theory implicit in the encyclicals. Rather it represents a new order of understanding and institutional application that must be programmed if we are to keep faith with the times in which we are living. I am confident that we are prepared to accept the challenge and have the ability to measure up to this responsibility.