

## THE PART OF THE LAITY IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH<sup>1</sup>

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**T**HE coming of age of the layman in the present-day Church can be looked at, as a result of the general upheaval in modern society, from two inter-related points of view. In the first place, present circumstances have reminded us that the Church, even where she seems most settled and at peace, remains essentially 'militant': her children, while 'in' the world, are never 'of' the world. Constant conflict within and without is inescapable for all the baptized. Consequently the Church, impelled by the demands of her missionary task, is ever anxiously urging the layman to become the apostle and the Gospel-bearer that is at once his vocation and his birthright; while the layman himself, now finding himself up against unfavourable surroundings, whether antagonistic or indifferent, is more fully alive to the claims made upon him. For the most part he has not shrunk from this challenge, but rather shown his resolve to turn to greater account the immense riches of the Faith and the Church found in the Sacraments, the liturgy, the Bible, the great spiritual traditions and theology.

In the second place, there can be detected a tendency which would claim for the layman a more specific status in the mission of Christendom. According to this, the layman should assume as his peculiar right and duty those tasks of the temporal order which do not of their very nature belong to the spiritual society which is the Church; he should even willingly take over, within the Church itself, certain functions and responsibilities of which the clergy, to their own advantage, could be freed.

These movements come under the scope of the historian to analyse and assess. At the same time the theologian cannot but yield to the clear impression that they reveal a fresh impulse of the Holy Spirit ceaselessly rejuvenating the Church. For a proof he can point to the response of the Church to this pressure: the creation of Catholic Action, and the encouragement given to the liturgical and retreat movements, and indeed to all the varied

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movements and institutions whose aim is to help the layman to measure up to the full demands of his Christian vocation. A fresh impulse indeed. Yet the historian and the theologian will both be careful not to label it as unprecedented and previously unheard of. History, of course, does not repeat itself: this is particularly true in our present context. Yet the history of God acting upon men is a history of constant renewals. External details may differ, but there abides a profound unity, an eternal youthfulness, in the heart of the Church.

## I

The part played by the layman in the early Church has a quite unique interest. Not that that Church ever allowed, to the layman's advantage, the sacred and reserved character of her own institutions to become in any way blurred. One has only to think of the circumstances leading to the institution of the diaconate or even of how the corporation of grave-diggers was *quasi-incorporated* into the ranks of the clergy. Nevertheless it was the faithful who gradually introduced the Church into every sphere, made it present everywhere through the radiant example of their lives, and shed their blood in a testimony which brought about a rich harvest of conversions. At this period the distinction had not yet been made between a fervent form of Christianity reserved for the clergy and dedicated persons, and a less-demanding form proper to the ordinary layman. Tertullian tells us that one can pick out a Christian by the single-mindedness with which he lives up to his faith in opposition to his whole environment. In a passage which contains perhaps the finest formulation of the ideal of a Christian laity, the author of the *Letter to Diognetus* says that the presence and influence of Christians in the world and at grips with the world give the latter its best opportunity of salvation. For him, 'Christians are to the world as the soul is to the body'; and this is a phrase which he goes on to develop, not just a felicitous figure of speech thrown in by the way. The worth and seriousness of the laymen of these days can be gauged from the Acts of the Martyrs. Laymen are numerous and in the vanguard among the heroes who suffered at Lyons in the second century. Laymen, too, those Sicilian martyrs whose witness overwhelms us in its rough simplicity; as, again, were Perpetua and Felicity who combined such noble dignity with a gentle and overflowing

tenderness. In view of such heroism and outstanding holiness it is not really surprising that there arose the temptation to regard such triumphs as in some measure admitting to certain privileges proper to the ordained clergy, and to attribute to these 'Confessors' an effective rôle in the discipline of Penance.

The early Church witnessed yet another decisive intervention on the part of the layman. After the first period of intense evangelization which we now know as the Apostolic Age, the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity was primarily the work of the faithful. These, no doubt, brought those whom they had won over to the priests for instruction; but the work itself of winning over these converts must certainly in great measure be attributable to them. The extent of this propaganda, which resulted, as Pliny was to find in Pontus, in the emptying of the pagan temples, gives us an idea of the zeal of the laity for this work. This concern for conversion, explanation, defence and constant apostolate enriched Christian literature with its chief lay contribution, namely the works of the Apologists. For, if all of these were not laymen, it remains true that many were, and notably the most famous of all, Justin Martyr. No other work of a Christian layman has had such great authority as the *Apologies*, whose systematic use is *de rigueur* as well for the theologian as for the historian of dogma.

## II

The Peace of Constantine, which brought about mass conversions, had the paradoxical effect of diminishing the lay contribution to the activity and holiness of the Church. Monasticism is a witness to this fact; for the monk is not a layman, and his status is to be explained as a reaction against the growth of mediocrity in the ranks of the simple faithful. The fervent part took its stand deliberately, and as an institution, over against the majority of the flock. This is no matter for surprise; the ideal conditions for a full Christian life do not coincide with taking things easy. So much is obvious; and Apollinaris of Laodicea insisted in reply to those for whom the ending of persecution was a matter of anxiety, that every Christian really goes on suffering persecution for justice's sake and bearing witness to Christ within himself among the humdrum details of everyday life. This, however, requires a deep and acute awareness of the

demands of faith. All did not fail as one might expect; the persecution of Julian the Apostate proved it. The letters of the Fathers and especially those of Augustine and Jerome enable us to follow and gauge the intensity of the religious life of many of the laity, and furthermore the sermons that were addressed to them by the Fathers reveal what must have been the faith of the people. It was to the crowds of Hippo that Augustine preached his profound sermons, his treatises on the Psalms and on St John; it was the crowds of Constantinople who protested against the unorthodox statements of incipient Nestorianism, and it was the masses of Ephesus who acclaimed the defenders of the *Theotokos*.

The hierarchy and the laity felt themselves quite patently to be bound by a solidarity, a sense of unity, and a profound feeling of belonging. No one insisted more upon this feeling than the Patriarch of Alexandria. The exiles of Athanasius brought about a strained situation in his episcopal town, and when he returned wild rejoicing broke loose. The part the laity had to play in electing their pastors contributed greatly to this state of mind; the bishop represented quite truly the mind of the community, which in turn considered him as their creation, their man. No one claimed that he was nothing more than a mandatory, or that he had to take his orders from the people; but the fact that at his election the *vox populi, vox Dei* was heard, brought him closer to his people. He came sometimes directly from among them, even from among the catechumens, as in the case of Ambrose of Milan. This shows to what an extent the layman found himself to be committed in the life of the Church and its responsibilities. He could be called upon to assume them in their totality—even if he had to change his status for this.

The growth of Christianity led the Church to play a part in temporal society, and, in consequence, to take an interest in its progress. From this ensued a whole new set of problems for the laity with regard to the Church as well as to the life of the state and of society. Constantine was interested at least as much if not more by temperament and by policy than by conviction in the life of the Church. His Christian legislation, as well his intervention and those of his immediate successors in the Arian crisis, followed from the 'episcopacy from without' which he claimed as his prerogative. But the day was to dawn when the Christianization of the state and of society would arise from the Christian

allegiance of the ruler. Gratian, directed by Ambrose, finally dropped even the traditional title of *Pontifex Maximus*; Theodosius gave way to the injunction of the same bishop and accepted a public penance in reparation for his cruelty in Thessalonica. These are significant and not isolated instances; henceforth, the exercise of patently lay offices, such as the administration of temporal society, was immediately influenced by the Christian conscience of those in authority. It was at least in part to fulfil their duty as Christians that Theodosius and his successors tackled the remnants of dying paganism and the proliferation of new heresies. The demands of Augustine against Donatism and of Cyril against Nestorius were not simply inspired by a particular theory concerning the duties of the state. They constitute an appeal to those Christians who wield civil or military power and are in duty bound to use it in favour of the Church. This conception of the commitment of the layman may disturb us, particularly in view of what ensued; it nevertheless was to play a decisive part at several crucial points in the history of the Church, and it touches upon the always burning problem of the duties of Christians who have influence in the State, the man in the street as well as the man at the top.

### III

The successive blows delivered by the barbarians at the Roman Empire brought the laity up against social conditions which made the practice of religion very precarious. In this state of confusion, the *De Civitate Dei*, a book which was for centuries the standard expression of the Christian *Weltanschauung*, formulated for the layman the values at stake in the perpetual battle which the world inflicts upon all Christians at all levels and at all times.

Unlike the West which was forced by circumstances to rebuild from the very foundations a whole new political and social structure, the East continued its development within the framework of the Empire. The régime recovered, this time in a Christian context and also under an oriental guise, its pristine sacred character. Endowed with a truly religious majesty, the *Basileus* felt himself by his very vocation to be involved in Church affairs, even in matters that were strictly of faith. Dogmatic edicts flowed uninterruptedly from the imperial chancellery. Justinian expatiated at length on the subject of heresy with the enthusiasm and in the technical terminology of the theologian. This intrusion,

this pre-eminence even, of the layman in the Church was manifested from the top to the bottom of the social scale. It resulted in terrible abuses; but its consideration is not without relevance for the purpose of this article. No other group of laymen has ever shown such passionate interest in the implications of the truths of faith as was manifested in Byzantium during the whole period of the Origenist, Monophysite, Monothelite and Iconoclastic controversies. That this enthusiasm had sinister implications and sometimes led to heresy is incontrovertible. Still we have here the spectacle of ordinary faithful intensely committed to dogmatic speculation. There was, admittedly, an almost intolerable confusion of the spiritual and temporal—and the Schism was to follow. Yet all this was something fundamentally wholesome; and the part played by certain outstanding ecclesiastical personalities, with their prestige in the eyes of a flock which vibrated in sympathy with their struggles and sufferings, betrays the authenticity of the fervour of the Byzantine people.

#### IV

In the West the conversion of the barbarians gave a pre-eminent position to the layman. The work of conversion was in fact effected through the laity, inasmuch as it revolved around the conversion of the ruler. This approach was predominant for centuries. When the Church thus used secular institutions to facilitate the spread of its saving message, she was careful to achieve this by making an appeal to the conscience and convictions of those in power. This method bore great fruits, notably in the conversion of the Franks and of the English. And if today we have misgivings about such an approach, we should not judge it too hastily. The history of many peoples within the Church witnesses to its providential nature. There was in fact nothing mechanical in the process; the aim was to produce a Prince of such overflowing faith as would inspire his subjects and lead him to secure the best possible conditions for their evangelization. The fact that initiators on this model were Christians of the stamp of Ethelbert and Edwin in England and St Stephen in Hungary is not a matter of pure chance. And cannot the vicissitudes of the Frankish Church under the Merovingians be explained by the absence at the helm of state of a great figure like Clovis?

The beginning of the eighth century saw the Arab invaders conquer Spain. This disaster was to lead to a new and important move on the part of the laity. Entrenched in the Asturias and Galicia, a handful of Visigoth Christians who had escaped the Arabs launched the semi-religious, semi-secular enterprise known as the *Reconquistad*. Christians thus took up arms in order to defend the faith and to put at its service their military prowess with all its potentialities. While I do not wish to dwell upon the notion of a holy war, we must remember that it presupposes in the layman who takes part in it a profound conviction that he belongs first and foremost to God and that he is under an obligation of concentrating all his efforts to prevent the triumph of a society which is deliberately anti-Christian and therefore a danger to his own and his neighbour's faith. The influence of the *Reconquistad* on the formation of the Christian character of Spain and its repercussion in the soul of a saint like Theresa of Avila give us some idea of its outstanding religious inspiration.

These two elements, the function of the ruler in the faith of the people, and the duty to defend it by force of arms and even to extend its influence, constitute the two mainsprings of the Carolingian policy. The personality of Charlemagne is not above all criticism; but in crowning him in Rome, the Church committed the West to a policy which had had happy results for a long time in the East. Nevertheless, this reign is noteworthy for its profound renewal of a Christian sense of duty and of total allegiance to the Church and the service of God. The great sagas which found their inspiration in the events of this period, enable us to have a faithful impression of its real nature. The Carolingian Renaissance gives us another significant indication of the stamp of the period. The sacred character conferred upon the Empire by the act of Christmas 800 lies at the source of the heroic effort of medieval society and of that widespread fusion of the religious and the secular which was to endure for centuries and to which no serious historian can today deny many happy results. Yet it must also be admitted that even from the time of Charlemagne it had many grave consequences. Here began that sad period during which it has been aptly said that the Church was in the power of the laity.

Inspired by an ancient Christian tradition, the faithful knew the value of almsgiving. It became the normal practice to give

generous endowments not only to charitable institutions but also to episcopal sees, churches and monasteries. Furthermore, the disintegration of the Roman Empire had often resulted in the bishop becoming the ruler both in temporal and in spiritual matters. The emergence of the feudal system and the agreement reached between the Papacy and the first Carolingians put a seal of approval upon the temporal powers of churchmen, at the same time causing ecclesiastical offices to become coveted posts for ambitious and greedy laymen. The See of Peter itself became a disputed preserve of influential Italian and Roman families. It would even be inaccurate to say that the Pope was looked upon as their private chaplain; the religious implication of such a title made it grossly inapplicable in view of the behaviour of the patrician Roman families on the one hand or of men like John XII and Benedict IX on the other. And this corruption was not only found in the higher levels of the hierarchy; it also extended to the lower degrees of a decadent and servile clergy.

## V

Salvation came from the same source whence the evil originated. It is the Ottos and especially St Henry II, and precisely because of the position they had acquired as a result of this confusion of the spiritual and the temporal, who encouraged and, where necessary, imposed the first measures of a much-needed reform. The imperial action was soon to assume such proportions that the Holy See had to react against it. Here we have the dispute between the Priesthood and the Empire. This ended with the victory of the Priesthood; for from this time, and in spite of many centuries of uncertainty and compromise, the principle of the radical distinction between the Priesthood, as sole judge in spiritual matters, and the lay power, with its own proper sphere of influence, was clearly defined and never again to be seriously challenged in its main lines within the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, the issue of this conflict would never have been reached had it not been for the imperial intervention with the Holy See and the promptings of secular authorities directed to the reform of clerical morals. It is to the imperial power that Silvester II and Leo owed their tiaras. The evolution which was taking place at this epoch as regards the precise point the laity had to play in the appointment of spiritual rulers was to end up in depriving the laity of all participa-



tion in the designation of their pastors. Yet it witnesses through its supporters to an anxiety for continuity with the very past they wished to reform, and thus underlies, in its own way, the importance that was given to the laity in the framework of the Church.

The life of the medieval Church was in full harmony with that of the faithful who added glorious and decisive pages to its history. Whatever may have been the economic implications and the political machinations of the Crusades, these expeditions for the freeing of the Holy Land were primarily due to the sense of allegiance of Christian believers who felt themselves bound to Christ their only King and Lord, and to their conviction that nothing could equal the gift of a life laid down in the service of such a well-loved Leader. The refusal of Godefroid de Bouillon to be crowned in the city where Christ wore a crown of thorns gives a striking illustration of this attitude. This need for heroism, for self-immolation, expressed itself in a great number of medieval institutions such as long and arduous pilgrimages, service in hospitals, devotion to religious ceremonies, and the building of cathedrals. If it is above all the names of the great of this world such as Elizabeth of Hungary or Louis of France who are recorded as having carried this heroism to the extremes of sanctity, there is not lacking an abundance of evidence, of legends and of customs which bear witness to the intensity of the Christian life of all classes and in every sphere. Many of the features of the medieval Church were modelled by the promptings and the needs of the laity. Thus the providing for Masses led to an increase of the clergy attached to churches and contributed to the spread of the 'private' Mass. The devotions and gifts that they inspired frequently led to the foundation of monasteries and convents or quite simply to new churches or the institution of confraternities.

The fervour of the laity was such that it was not without excesses. At the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the Church found it necessary to refuse its sanction to certain lay movements directed to spiritual reform. Some of them ended up in open conflict, such as that of Peter Waldo the merchant of Lyons. Yet these excesses were only corruptions of a true leavening process which the Church was to canalize and bring to a happy outcome in the approbation of the mendicant Orders. Not that these Orders were lay movements; but, as modern historians have underlined, in their institution the Church was responding to the

claims and the mentality of the laity on both the temporal and spiritual planes. We have only to consider how the democratic constitution of these Orders coincided with the emergence of the communes and how they settled in the towns which were the hot-bed of the new social forces. The constitution and success of the Third Orders, the *Militia Christi*, favoured this deep symbiosis between the 'brethren' and the faithful who, through their attachment to a religious order, expressed even outwardly in the wearing of the habit their anxiety not to be mistaken for second-rate Christians.

## VI

The Protestant Reform presented itself as a fascinating temptation for the laity. But if the princes and the civil authorities snatched eagerly at the opportunity of extending their power into the spiritual realm, the main part of the faithful was far from unanimous in welcoming an offer of promotion to a priesthood shared by all and become a common property. In order to ensure the success of these violent ruptures on the part of princes and even bishops, it was found necessary to break down many oppositions by brutal force, as for instance, in Switzerland, the celebrated resistance of the Oberland peasants to innovations inflicted upon them by the burghers of Berne. A like resistance would have made of Sweden an easily recoverable country up to the end of the sixteenth century. It would likewise have saved the Faith in Wales, had there been a sufficiency of priests made available to back up the resistance of the faithful. In Switzerland today, a country so profoundly affected in its religious character by the Protestant Reform, there are still to be found many places and districts where the faithful have succeeded in preserving the Faith of their fathers. But among all these resistances that of Ireland is the most outstanding and consequently the most important for the history of the Church. The part of the clergy in sustaining this resistance was truly magnificent. Yet it was above all due to the fidelity, the depth of conviction and the endurance under persecution of the ordinary Irish people that there arose those Anglo-Saxon forms of Catholicism characterized by their hold on the poorest classes in society and their boundless generosity on both the material and spiritual planes.

The Counter-Reformation was principally initiated by the

hierarchy, the clergy and religious. The part played by the laity, even that of princes, except for Philip II, was minimal. But the whole of this work was constantly done with an eye to meeting the needs of the faithful. The Society of Jesus, by the diffusion of the *Exercices* and by the provision of schools, created a profound movement among people of the world and laid down the foundations of a new type of education providing leaders for the future. The reason why the Jesuits were so violently attacked was that their methods and influence succeeded in forming a laity which was conscious of its responsibilities and totally committed to the Faith. Besides the Jesuits many others were busy renewing the faith of the laity. Many a page of Henri Brémond reveals the quality and earnestness of a devotion which penetrated deeply into the hearts of the ordinary faithful. The appeals of St Francis de Sales to the devout life were not made in vain. Unfortunately for a variety of reasons, the laity of the eighteenth century went without this solid instruction. Its rulers, much under the influence of the *Aufklärung* and of 'Josephism', only gave mind to the Church when they wished to bully it or control its influence. The suppression of the Society of Jesus, and a series of measures against church institutions (resulting in countries like Portugal and in Latin America in evils from which they have not recovered even today), were the results of their methods. But the French Revolution, while it rekindled the atmosphere of the persecutions, also had the effect of renewing the courage of the faithful and of enabling them to prove of what mettle they were made. One only has to think of families like those in which the *Curé d'Ars* and other saints were formed to see what depths of heroic devotion were shown by those lay people who banded together to protect the outlawed pastors who provided for their spiritual welfare.

## VII

The immense development of lay activity in our times may sometimes lead us to underestimate the function and achievements of laymen in the past. They had their faults and their blind-spots, notably in the social sphere, but a movement such as that initiated by Ozanam springs from the highest and purest Christian charity. The political struggle, with a triumphant liberalism in full cry after the Church, enabled the laity to reveal the full extent of their inner resources, their sterling worth. Judges who gave up

their posts in protest against unjust laws often obeyed the demands of their consciences to the point of heroism. The Church of France, dispossessed by the Separation Laws, was yet able to rebuild its seminaries and schools, provide for the upkeep of their clergy as well as for the building of new churches, thanks to the generosity of the faithful. In other countries, guided by their convictions, and under the impulse of the most genuine spiritual motives, Catholics skilfully and courageously took up the fight on the political front. Windthorst, for instance, the founder of the German Centre Party, combined with his deep faith a fine sense of the distinction between the spiritual and the temporal: Bismark was forced to go to Canossa. In Switzerland a movement was born from a similar inspiration. Its founders were men for whom the fight under the banner of the Faith did not consist merely in paying lip-service to some vague principles leading to forms of political opportunism, nor in the public defence of principles which had no motive power in their own private lives. They were Christians through and through who, having seen that the real fight had to be engaged, were prepared to commit themselves generously and totally to it. A complete renewal in depth was taking place which was to reach its zenith in the invitation of Pope St Pius X to frequent communion and to a greater participation in the liturgy. Meanwhile missions, retreats and good works nourished this generation of men which, for all its being less anxious than ours, more settled perhaps, and less austere as far as externals go, nevertheless had a real integrity of its own. What could be more moving than the meeting of this old type of Catholicism with the first fruits of Catholic Action under the blows of the persecutors in Mexico during the 'thirties?

There is no need for me to repeat that I have not tried to suggest here that there is 'nothing new under the sun'. On the contrary it has been my intention to show how the example of past enthusiasms and commitments can inspire us for those of today and demonstrate, if needs be, their genuine Christian quality.