

## PRELIMINARIES TO CATHOLIC ACTION

I write, first, as one of the 'young people' to whom the advocates of Catholic Action seem especially to appeal and, secondly, as a provincial.

What exactly is happening in this Catholic Action campaign?

Now and then, at the invitation of devoted men, a lecturer from London or Liverpool descends to harangue us on Catholic Action or to show us some phase of its workings. Who are 'us'? A group of people representing 1 in 1,000 of the available Catholic population, rising half-a-dozen times a year under the stimulus of a dinner or a dance to 25 in 1,000 and once each year, at a Sunday evening cinema-hall Rally, to 100 in 1,000. And of this weekly or fortnightly band, Apostolic in its diminutiveness at least, who are the regular components? A few married women, a few teachers, a few working-girls; to four of these add one man—a clerk, a plumber, a custom-officer or an out-of-work.

Now, when the lecturer has departed, what in the main is the idea left uppermost in the minds of the hearers of the word? During the lecture they have been galvanized and uplifted by the nobility of the appeal; inspired with generosity, they have been impelled towards the brink. But, as the words which pass between them show, when they endeavour to plunge from that brink of noble principles into the complexities of direct action in their own private lives and spheres of existence, they are partly perplexed and partly dispirited. It seems to me that the chances of Catholic Action are being imperilled by the present formula of propaganda which is behind most of the Action *fevorinos* that we hear. First, by the boundless optimism that is being preached, *viz.*, that the Church can save civilization now as she did after the breakdown of the Roman empire, and over-insisted claims of that kind which lead many to go home under the impression that, locked away in the Vatican archives, the Pope has blue-prints of Rooseveltian vastness and complexity for the establishment of a universal

## BLACKFRIARS

Earthly Paradise, or that, if Cardinal Bourne were elected Prime Minister of England to-morrow, this 'clinic' civilization of ours would pass away and Merrie England blossom in a week. The disillusionment inevitably brought about by a little further reflection and contact with the heart-breaking trivialities of ordinary life results in what is dangerously near a total disbelief in the whole idea of Catholic Action. Secondly, it is imperilled by the generally gained impression that 'action' is the Thing; that, unless Catholics successfully sally forth into the market-place at once, they may as well drop Catholic Action, run back to the sanctuary and stay among the inner defences like good little mice. I would find fault with the present formula, then, not for its contents but for its lack of an explanatory clause.

It seems to me that this constant harping on the necessity for action creates a precipitate view of the nature and prospects of Catholic Action in the mind of hearers. Should not the formula be modified so as to be at once less optimistic in scope and more hopeful? That is to say, people will more readily retain membership of Catholic societies and attend Catholic Action meetings if they are assured that what they are already doing *is* Catholic Action and also the best kind of Catholic Action that can be done at the present stage of development. To give and hear lectures on the Church's philosophy in social and economic matters, bringing back into the minds of the laity at least the first fact that, after the centuries of siege, the Church though seated in the sanctuary is once more extending into the market-place in virtue of the universality of the Moral Law of which she is the guardian; that the Precious Blood so long, as it were, constricted to the Heart, is not only desirous but capable of flowing throughout all the Members even to the very fingertips—all this is a necessary preliminary to Catholic Action, and to that extent *is* Catholic Action. And what makes all this Catholic Action is the fact that it is done at the desire of the Bishops; it is the hierarchic quality that distinguishes Catholic Action from all other forms of Catholic activity. If Catholic Action were merely to consist in rallying

phalanxes of Catholics in loyalty and reverence to the Pope and the Bishops, it would be doing a great work; and it is a part of progress in this loyalty to become acquainted with the teaching of Popes and Bishops. The first stages in Catholic Action tend more to the study than to the street.

There is another point, more consoling and also more important. If one thing is most true in the spiritual teaching of the Church, it is that the life of personal holiness comes first. Almost, we might say, just in that degree that we succeed in making ourselves more like Christ, will our external works of Catholic Action suggest themselves, works which will be inspired by Him and not by any form of self-interest, sustained and brought to a good end by His grace, for He alone is able to give us a perfect work. All things will then come in their proper order. This is the whole root of the teaching of that great guide of the modern layman, St. Francis de Sales. 'Great is the folly of those who wish to be martyred in the Indies . . . '—and that goes for a great many of our ambitious plans even at home. We grow by the roots, and not by the branches, insisted the Saint. 'Haste is the pest of true devotion'; and he exhorts us to walk step by step with God, neither lagging behind, *nor running in front*. In the lives of holy individuals and holy societies we find a period of preparation—a time of service and prayer in which they gained a more distinct view of the Beloved, in which ideals were illumined and made permanent; then and only then did they issue forth, impelled solely by the love they had won and fostered to do works for the Lord. It was good then to read in our Catholic newspapers that the teachers in the Catholic Action schools in Belgium are insisting on this truth—that the first condition of Catholic Action is a deepening of each Catholic's spiritual life. This is implicit in the Encyclical *Mens Nostra*, in which the Holy Father urged the making of Retreats for the formation of Apostles of Catholic Action. It is taught in the Joint Letter of our own Bishops which notified the setting up of the National Board of Catholic Action. One of the Retreat Fathers at Corby Hall recently said: 'The Retreat-house is the foundry of Catholic Action.' For if the

## BLACKFRIARS

unready Catholic, who has not by a more particular attempt to follow Christ learned to be careful as to the why and how of motives and objects, flings himself recklessly into all manner of works, there is danger that pride and self in their many forms may unconsciously creep in and vitiate his usefulness. Father Willie Doyle used to say that 'works of zeal are easy and attractive; but going against self, till grace and perseverance give facility, is cruel work, a hard battle.'

Particularly in England, where paucity of numbers definitely precludes much external work, the increased practice of 'first things first' will supply the defect, for God does not expect the impossible . . . . And, after all, of what worth is this Catholic Action? It is as dung, if it have not Good Souls for its beginning and the making of Good Souls for its end. Increased membership and increased hope would ensue if lecturers took pains to give a value to those small doings which weighty discussions on social justice and land-cultivation sometimes suggest are worth nothing at all. A good Catholic mother should not be allowed to go home under the impression that this Catholic Action requires that she participate in projects that tend to prevent starvation in the Ukraine on the one hand and the destruction of foodstuffs in America on the other. That is how audiences are thinned down to nothing. Disillusioned actionists might regain hope and find a new and encouraging sense of values if they were to think over one of the meditations in a C.T.S. pamphlet *The Divine Lover* by Pere Charles, S.J. Taking the Gospel words 'When I will return, I will repay thee,' he shows us the true vocation and the true value of the lowly innkeeper. We are mostly innkeepers. We are, perhaps, a bed-ridden invalid, a little religious shut up in a convent, an 'old maid'; we cannot run about the great highways, we cannot perform great and glamorous deeds. Nor are we the worse off, or the more helpless for that. It is the old lesson. We must do what we can where we can; and that is all that is required of us. The realization of this doctrine will quieten our solicitude and give new strength to our faith. For a great deal of this

## PRELIMINARIES TO CATHOLIC ACTION

anxiety and bother about the prospects of bringing Church principles into practice comes not from virtue but from a lack of faith. The Little Flower converted the heathen by making acts of loving sacrifice within her convent-walls. We should remember that in the Divine economy indirect methods are not always the least efficient.

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## CATHOLIC ACTION AND NATIONAL LIFE

ONE day near the beginning of June Mr. Shane Leslie, in a letter to *The Times*, compared the Irish to the English as professional politicians to amateurs. It is a pleasing conception, the Mother of Parliaments retaining her amateur status, bringing with it a vision of a leisured and stately autonomy. At the same time there is something very admirable and winning about the continuous enthusiasm for politics that certain peoples display. But the admiration we English accord them seems to me to be that which we give to a child who is clever at his play. For a whole people to be politically effective, that was possible in the city-states of Hellas, it was the ideal of Rousseau, but, so we are told, it is out of the question in the modern nation State. We mark our ballot papers, having for the most part but the vaguest ideas of the particular issues at stake, and thus is the voice of the people heard; then and only then. But can this be really all? Are those only to be reckoned politicians who sit at Westminster or nurse constituencies? I do not believe it for a moment. The more benefits are conferred on us by the legislature, the more will our interests lie with it; and the more closely we seem to be entwined in the net of economic circumstance, the more we shall look to it for help and guidance. In these days, when the work, some would call it the interference, of Parliament has become so enormous, and when we are all increasingly aware of the influence and complexity of economics, one would expect that the voice of the people