

## CATHOLIC ACTION AND CATHOLIC LIFE

THE zeal which has come over some of us to develop Catholic Action in obedience to the Holy Father's command is altogether admirable and it is unfortunate that there are still so many yet untouched by it. But there is a danger, which has already appeared in a mild degree, of this zeal developing into a mere passion for external works. The inner spirit which gives rise to Catholic Action gradually disappears and those who have not yet acquired the zeal are still less inclined to take part in the new apostolate. The excesses of the fervent and the criticism of the lukewarm are alike due to the error which consists in thinking that unless we are obviously **DOING** something we are not participating in Catholic Action. To many of us Catholic Action still means principally public demonstrations, protests to members of Parliament, anti-Birth-Control agitation, accompanied by the painful futility of numerous committee meetings. Some of these external effects are indeed produced by Catholic Action, but they are quite secondary to the real movement, which is simply the overflowing of the inner life of the Catholic.

For Catholic Action is essentially Catholic Life, we are told by the Pope, who has done most to inaugurate this movement of modern times. "Catholic Action is justly identified with the Christian life," said Pope Pius XI to the students of the Mexican Institute on May 29, 1934. It is the characteristic of life to give rise to external works, to common social activity, but these are not the essence of life, nor are they the essence of Catholic Action. This view is not really opposed to the better known definition which states, "Catholic Action is nothing other than the participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy" (Letter to Cardinal Bertram, November 18, 1928). Viewing these two definitions together, it becomes clear that Catholic Action is a sharing in the age-old task of the Church, the spreading of the grace of Christ to the world. Behind it all stands the figure of Christ, and Catholic Action is successful just in so far as it

makes Him better known, more loved and thereby initiates or revives the life of grace in the souls of men. It is the task of the Bishops and Priests to spread by teaching and the administration of the Sacraments that grace of Christ to the members of His visible Church. This of itself is so enormous a task that there is comparatively little opportunity to deal with lapsed Catholics and still less to make effective contact with Protestants. Moreover it often happens that the priest is precluded by his very office from reaching those who most need the grace of Christ. Bad Catholics are embittered and Protestants mistrust his motives. It remains therefore for the more fervent laity, directed by the teaching of the Bishops and the grace of Christ within them, to carry on in their own circles where they are accepted and where others will listen to them, the work of the hierarchy. Granted this minimum of organization, the method of procedure in Catholic Action becomes quite secondary. Inevitably these more fervent lay-people will by good example and occasional conversation act as apostles in the circle which they frequent.

Catholic Action is thus seen to be, above all, Life—Life organized by the hierarchy and distributed to others by lay apostles.

It is Life, Christian Life, pre-eminently Spiritual Life, Divine Grace coming from God through Christ and His ministers to the human soul. Life increases and gives rise to further and more abundant life. Owing to a variety of causes certain species may dwindle in numbers and perhaps cease to exist at all, but the normal and natural thing is for living things to multiply and this by vital processes. Life is necessary to reproduce life. And if scientists should ever be able to produce life from a non-living reality it would be an abnormality in the scheme of things. The Catholic Church here as everywhere employs for the production of supernatural effects means which in themselves are normal and natural. Granted a deep spiritual life in the soul of an individual, the customary living contact of that individual with others will increase or re-create their spiritual life. His living example also shows to them the possibility of attaining

a higher degree of spirituality. And his natural conversation elevated by the living grace within him attracts them, makes them long to have the same grace themselves and impels them to seek after it. Without any further effort, without any writing of books, learned discourses or violent controversy, one essential of Catholic Action is here fulfilled and even brought to an effective conclusion.

It is true that the immediate effect is not evident and that the production of manifest results will be slow. But the seed is sown and will bear fruit in due time. The answer to those who complain of the tardy coming of the fruit is given in forceful words by M. Pierre Bayart in his recent work, *L'Action Catholique Spécialisée* (pp. 70-71): "And do you count as nothing the effects which this method permits us to realize? Creating new attitudes of mind, changing an atmosphere, causing prejudice to fall away, gradual enlightenment of men's minds and opening of their eyes, transforming souls, giving meaning to a gesture and a soul to dead customs, the revival, little by little, of religious faith, and already, here or there, under the influence of this psychological transformation, even outward actions and the expression of the spirit in reality. . . . A 'Renewal of Spirit'? Is it not precisely this?"

It is quite unimportant on whom this living influence is exercised, whether they be fervent or lukewarm or lapsed Catholics, or even Protestants. And the effect on Protestants need not be conversion to the Catholic Church. The first and most important thing is to create in them the love of Christ and the beginnings of sanctifying grace. It is the first and also the last end of all Catholic Action, it is the purpose of Christ's Church on earth (which after all is only a means by which men come to Christ). We must be careful to avoid the appearance of proselytizing, remembering that while the visible Church is the most secure means of salvation God also has His own ways of bringing souls to His Presence. Catholic Action also co-operates with God in these other ways. In many cases actual conversion will be the result of these efforts, for once life is planted it will grow, flourish and increase of itself until it finds an atmosphere where it can be

directed and guided in its increase, the visible Catholic Church.

Catholic Action is concerned directly with spiritual, not material, life. It is therefore not directly political, since politics is concerned with material welfare as its immediate object. But Catholic Action will ultimately influence politics in so far as it elevates the minds of politicians who come into contact with its living force. And the more this life is spread to the souls of men, the more they come into contact with the sweetness of Christ manifested in the souls of others, the more will Christ's love dominate their actions and direct their policy. It will ensure just legislation in home affairs and a more widespread charity in the outer world, thus establishing the true peace of Christ in the kingdom of Christ and effecting completely the end of Catholic Action and of the Church's mission.

Catholic Action is not political, but it is social. For Catholic Action is life and life takes on a social form. From the dawn of human history man has sought to enter into society with his fellows for the preservation and improvement of his life. Each child receives life from society and enters with its first breath the society of the family. Natural life is social and spiritual life also takes on a social form. The Church herself is a society and gathers together her children in association with one another. The Mass is a public and social act, the Holy Eucharist a common table where Life is given as food to members of Christ's society. Catholic Action follows the same direction and takes on a social form. Realizing this, those who take part in Catholic Action will be generous with the riches of Catholic life at their disposal. They will not stifle it in narrow asceticism, but will cherish and direct the impulse of life seeking to spread itself beyond the confines of their own souls.

Social contact takes place in definite circles. Business men meeting together in the natural conditions of their business life can influence the spiritual lives of one another. University students direct their influence first to other students. Working men can introduce the spirit of Catholicism to their fellow-workers. All this by means suitable to the

sphere of life. The methods of good example and friendly, unforced conversation will hold good in every sphere, but additional force is given to these methods if, for instance, the business man is noticed by his colleagues to be carrying on business with a view to justice and charity, considering the *common welfare in addition to his own enrichment*, if the University student can show that great learning is not incompatible with the Catholic Faith, or if the working man can gradually make his companions see that the Catholic Church is not for an exclusive caste but for all men and has indeed shown herself to be in a special way the defender of the rights of human labour. In this too the method to be followed has been laid down by the Pope, notably in the *Quadragesimo Anno*: "Undoubtedly the first immediate apostles of the working-men must themselves be working-men, while the apostles of the industrial and commercial world should themselves be employers and merchants."

Catholic Action is Life organized by the hierarchy. In the first place this Life is directly communicated by Christ through the Divinely appointed hierarchy of Bishops and Priests to the members of His Church. The control of the hierarchy does not end there. It is their task also to direct the spiritual life thus acquired to the fullest advantage for the sanctification of the souls who receive it. This they do by preaching and spiritual direction. They have a further duty; they are the dispensers of the grace of Christ and are ordained for the purpose of directing that grace to human souls, whether these are within the visible Church or not. For obvious reasons they cannot have much direct influence on those outside the Church nor even upon many less fervent Catholics. It remains for the laity by Catholic Action to continue the task of the hierarchy in spreading grace to these souls. But the hierarchy must always exercise a controlling influence. Each plays the part proper to it. The priest encourages the lay person to greater fervour and instructs him in those aspects of his religion which he most needs in his particular sphere. The layman knows the best methods of approach and what it is in the Catholic Faith that these souls especially lack. There arises here the need of some

rudimentary organization in the form of study-circles or centres where results may be compared and where one can learn from another what methods of approach have been most successful. Priests, understanding and capable, are required to direct such centres, to assist by their theological knowledge, to encourage by their apostolic zeal. But the essential activity must be left to the laity—the priest must not become a mere dictator.

The exact form of organization is of secondary importance and must in any case be adapted to national conditions. Undoubtedly the organization most in harmony with the Pope's requirements is, according to his own words, the movement known in Belgium and France as the *Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne*, Catholic Working Youth. Though by this time widespread, developed and highly organized, it yet retains the essential characteristics of Catholic Action as outlined above. The movement has indeed been introduced into England and can be adapted to English conditions, but we cannot yet presume to say that it is the ideal form of organization for this country. It may be that in the course of time England will furnish an example of another organization which is even more in accordance with the Pope's wish.

From all this is it clear that one who participates in Catholic Action thus organized is a true apostle. He is not content to keep his spiritual life to himself but seeks to spread it to others. Where Catholic Action is established he receives a mission to do this. He is sent. And an apostle is precisely one who is sent.

The apostles of Catholic Action in this country will have in view national conditions and, in obedience to the instruction of the hierarchy, will adopt those methods of approach which are most likely to appeal to the English character. But the spirit of Catholic Action and the primary method of obtaining its effect must hold in this country as in any other. For the spirit is the spirit of Christ with its universal appeal and the method is the common human method of approach, which is adopted by men and women the world over without regard for class or nation.

EDWARD QUINN.