

THE NOVELIST AND PLAYWRIGHT IN CATHOLIC ACTION

his spirit can flower, to concentrate in stillness and attention upon the purely Catholic aspect of his subject, and forthwith, as he writes, he will be engaged in Catholic Action. He may also in spite of himself, because of the strong light above his head, have traced upon his page a pattern thrown there in shadow from the leaves of an invisible Tree.

N. S. LEITCH.

LAY INITIATIVE IN CATHOLIC ACTION.

There is a widespread, if inarticulate, misgiving about Catholic Action which needs ventilation and elimination. A particularly vehement layman might express it in some such terms as these:

' Catholic Action? Ecclesiastical Fascism! A pretext for further encroachment by the clergy on the layman's business! More clerical domination and interference! More paralysing of lay initiative and endeavour! Apostolate of the Laity! Clerical *Gleichschaltung!* '

The Englishman, especially, has a horror of being 'organized.' And organization, it is universally agreed, is of the very essence of Catholic Action. The adoption and organization of an *oeuvre* by the Hierarchy is precisely what makes that *oeuvre* entitled to be called Catholic Action. The local establishment and direction of Catholic Action is committed to the parochial clergy. Must we not then infer that the disgruntled layman is right?

The most effective way to disillusion him would be, perhaps, to take him abroad to countries where Catholic Action is really in action and is already fully organized and vigorous. Failing that, these few considerations may help to shake the prejudices.

BLACKFRIARS

All depends on what we mean by 'organization.' In the strict sense in which the word is applied to Catholic Action, organization, so far from imposing, *excludes* uniformity: it fosters rather than hinders individual initiative and enterprise. The point cannot be explained better than in the words of the Holy Father himself.

Organization in general means the unity of many members of which each preserves its own particular nature, functions and life, but which together pursue a common aim and concur in the formation of a single body, itself subordinated to one single vital principle. This idea of organization becomes clearer when we contrast it with that of the unity of a machine. The latter is composed of constituents which are lifeless and which exercise no distinctive action except in virtue of some power which is extrinsic to them. It is quite otherwise with an organism, be it physical or social. Here each cell lives its own particular life and exercises its own particular functions precisely in virtue of its integration in the organism. Obedient to a primary vital principle, each component contributes to the life, the finality and the perfection of the whole . . . What is needed is unity without uniformity; co-ordination without absorption: association without prejudice to distinction. (*Il faut unir sans unifier, coordonner sans absorber, grouper sans confondre.*) (Address to Card. Maurin and C. A. pilgrims, 19.5.30.)

This 'principle of differentiation' or 'specialization,' to which the Holy Father has so often called attention as inseparable from Catholic Action organization, clearly reflects the doctrine of St. Paul.

As in one body we have many members, but all the members have not the same office, so we, being many, are one body in Christ; and everyone members one of another; and having different gifts to be used according to the rule of faith. (Rom. xii, 4, 5.)

Indeed, it may be truly said that the whole idea of Catholic Action is an application of

St. Paul's idea of the Mystical Body in which each member has its own proper function and exercises it all the more effectively because it 'holds the head from which the whole body, by joints and bands being supplied with nourishment and compac-

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ted, groweth unto the increase of God.' The 'hierarchical apostolate of the laity' does not mean that the clergy and the laity usurp each other's business. It is the formal recognition that the layman has his own God-given apostolic powers and sphere of action. It means that each individual layman will be able to do his own job all the more effectively because all the more authoritatively by being more closely knit with the apostolic authority and with a vast international team of fellow-workers. Acting under that sanction he can be confident that he is really carrying on the authentic apostolate of Jesus Christ and not following his own whims, and that his labours are not overlapping with those of others. ('Catholic Action,' *The Rosary*, July, 1934, p. 127.)

It would be premature to define what should be the respective limits of clerical and lay direction of Catholic Action in England, but our Bishops, in their Whitsun Pastoral, have already formally disclaimed any intention of interfering with the autonomy of existing organizations. It seems to be a recognized principle of Catholic Action that 'Under the necessary control of the Hierarchy, the *immediate* direction of the action committed to them should be left to the laity. We say *immediate* advisedly, for the *supreme* direction belongs to the spiritual power.' (Abbe Marquart in *Credo*, No. 49, p. 7.) This is a broad principle, whose application will vary widely according to local conditions. But the warnings of Mgr. Felin, Bishop of Troyes, are of universal application.

It is a bad state of things when the priest takes everything into his own hands. He can never be fully qualified. Nor has he the time if he is occupied as he should be with his priestly ministry. Moreover, he would do his people a very grave wrong, for they would not deserve to be called Catholics if they were not allowed to exercise their apostolate.

But, apart from the legitimate freedom of action and initiative which organization *within* Catholic Action should promote, there is another, an indirect, way in which the establishment of Catholic Action should, it would seem, prove a liberating influence in lay apostolic enterprise. This is to be found, paradoxically, precisely in its 'official,'

'hierarchic' character. Just because Catholic Action is the exercise of the official, corporate, hierarchic apostolate, there are immense fields of (at least indirectly) apostolic labour which lie outside its scope. Some of these (*e.g.* work for 'Catholic' political parties, trade-unions, etc.) have been formally excluded by the Holy See from Catholic Action in the strict sense. There are many other good works which, while not in themselves (*ex fine operis*) apostolic, can and should be undertaken by the laity for apostolic purposes (*ex fine operantis*)—*e.g.* land-settlements, housing schemes, film-production, novel-writing, clinics, journalism, collaborating with various secular and interdenominational institutions, etc.,—but which cannot, of their nature, normally form part of the Church's official apostolic action. There are yet more which the Hierarchy might deem it inopportune to incorporate into Catholic Action. In short, Catholic Action in the strict sense is not co-extensive with the lay apostolate in the broad sense. Hence the Holy Father can repeatedly assert both that the lay apostolate is 'inherent in the Christian life' and 'for all,' and that Catholic Action is 'for an *élite*.'¹

Of course, no enterprise can be called in any sense apostolic unless it possesses the sanction, at least tacit, of the Hierarchy, in which the plenitude of the apostolic authority resides. But

The intervention of the Hierarchy is of two sorts. Either it directs the enterprise effectively by assuming entire responsibility, in which case we have Catholic Action in the *strict* sense—action purely and specifically religious. Or else the Hierarchy does no more than approve a movement or an organization, together with the aims it pursues and the means it employs, without taking responsibility either for the direction or the execution. Here we have Catholic Action in the *broad* sense of the word. (Dabin, *op. cit.* p. 39).

¹ On the 'broad' and 'strict' sense of Catholic Action, see P. Dabin, *L'Action catholique*, p. 28. Cf. T. Gilby, O.P., *Catholics and the National Consciousness*, BLACKFRIARS, June, 1934, for a programme of 'infiltration' to 'prepare the ground by the action of Catholics for the full strength of Catholic Action.'

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In addition, there is obviously a large field for individual apostolic enterprise (e.g. informal conversations with non-Catholics, novel-writing with apostolic intent, etc.) in which there is no explicit intervention of the Hierarchy at all.

An advantage which follows upon the formal establishment of Catholic Action is that the line of demarcation between the Church's official, corporate apostolate and the less official or unofficial apostolic enterprises of individuals and groups becomes clearly defined. So long as this is obscured, the latter are bound to be seriously hampered. No layman with any sense of his limitations wants to compromise the Church in his possible mistakes, and no Bishop with any sense of responsibility will encourage him to do so. The result may easily be a creeping paralysis of lay initiative and endeavour. Timidity, and consequently banality, may easily come to infect contributors to a press whose every utterance and opinion may involve the Hierarchy and the Catholic Body at large.

Where Catholic Action is established all that is changed. Catholic Action, and Catholic Action alone, is known to represent the official, fully responsible, corporate lay-apostolate of the Church. No privately-owned and privately-run newspaper, for instance, however uncompromisingly Catholic and loyal to the Bishops' desires and behests, will claim to be 'The Catholic Newspaper' or 'The Organ of the Catholic Body.' It will be known just for what it is—the organ of a loyal and devoted group of Catholic journalists who endeavour to record and review current events from a Catholic standpoint to the best of their necessarily limited abilities, without in any way compromising their ecclesiastical superiors or pretending to voice the unanimous opinion and outlook of their fellow-Catholics. They will thus be freed from an overwhelming responsibility and Bishops and people alike will have the advantage of being relieved from the fear of journalists' *faux-pas*, and of being served by a live and vigorous Catholic Press.

The example of the Press is taken as being, perhaps, the most striking. But the principle would apply, *mutatis mu-*

tandis, to other forms of activity. It would seem to be universally true that the clear definition of what is and what is not official Catholic Action would emancipate lay initiative in all spheres *outside* its own immediate scope.

A final point. This same definition will foster initiative *inside* Catholic Action itself. Lack of such definition, the absence of definite status with all its concomitant uncertainties, must inevitably discourage initiative in those spheres in which official corporate action is called for. It is difficult to act in such circumstances with real spontaneity and enthusiasm without complete confidence that one's action is authorized and will be supported by the Church's divinely constituted rulers. The establishment of Catholic Action ensures that all that is done in its name is done with direct mandate from the successors of the Apostles who accept full responsibility. Here again—although, as authorities frequently observe, Catholic Action adds considerable burdens, duties and responsibilities to the shoulders of the Bishops and clergy—it is a powerful factor in the 'emancipation' of the layman and the encouragement of his initiative.

And that, beyond all doubt, is what the Holy Father intends it to be.

HENRY GORDON.