

## THE MEANING OF CATHOLIC ACTION

WE are all familiar with a number of societies and associations which pursue their peculiar missions under the guidance of the Church. There are the Confraternities and Third Orders<sup>1</sup> which promote self-sanctification, there are the works for the formation of the young; others which, like the S.V.P., provide material assistance to the poor, while the Guilds are concerned with professional interests. Lastly there are the societies concerned with larger questions of propaganda and defence of principles, such as the Catholic Truth Society, Catholic Evidence Guild and Catholic Social Guild. They all play an invaluable part in the life of the Church, and they depend upon the laity for success. They all aim more or less directly at the spiritual welfare of souls. So it would seem that they must be entitled to consider themselves part of Catholic Action since this is, according to the Pope's definition, 'nothing other than the participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy.' To question this may at first sight seem excessively punctilious. But when it is seen that the distinction between the strict use of the term and its haphazard bestowal can and should be made it will, perhaps, be used with more caution than has been the case hitherto. If Catholic Action is to prove itself other than a new name for 'the old firm' or a fresh panacea such as our economists favour some little care will have to be used by responsible authorities.

Until the Whitsun declaration of the Hierarchy there was no Catholic Action in the strict sense of the term in England, and until the programme of the Board formed by

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<sup>1</sup> Some qualification seems called for as regards the Third Order of St. Dominic. From its beginnings this 'Militia of Jesus Christ' was devoted to self-sanctification *through the active apostolate*. It is the declared policy of the present Dominican Master-General to refashion it on its original lines and to make of it an effective fighting force for Catholic Action. Cf. *BLCKFRIARS*, August, 1933; pp. 720-1. (Ed.)

their lordships is made known it will be difficult to contrast the various organizations which fall on either side of the line of demarcation. But that some of those we have considered should find themselves excluded is not unlikely and their members will be the last to cavil.<sup>2</sup> Without attempting to prognosticate the declarations which are as yet *sub judice* and without discussing the claims of individual societies it is proposed to consider in these pages the cardinal points of Catholic Action.

To assist us in this we have the pronouncements of the Pope (a collection of which has recently been issued by the *Bonne Presse* of Paris), the records of progress in lands where they have been put into practice and the studies which have been devoted to this modern crusade. Of these there are none of any practical value in English and it will doubtless be some time before the magisterial work of Père Dabin in Belgium and Mgr. Civardi in Italy is surpassed. For all but the experts, however, a few papal letters should suffice.

Though it is usual to trace the spread of Catholic Action back to the first mention made by the Pope in the encyclical *Ubi Arcano* it was not until 1928 when the famous Letter to Cardinal Bertram appeared<sup>3</sup> that a full statement was given to Christendom. Since then a stream of letters and addresses have elucidated the teaching of the Holy Father. Of these the letters to Cardinal Segura,<sup>4</sup> to the Argentine Bishops<sup>5</sup> and the Patriarch of Lisbon<sup>6</sup> which deal with the questions of the professional guilds, the auxiliary societies, and with political activities respectively, may be said to form the statute-book of Catholic Action. Catholic Action

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<sup>2</sup> For instance the A.P.F. and the Sodalities will rank as auxiliary societies.

<sup>3</sup> A.A.S. 1928, p. 384.

<sup>4</sup> A.A.S. 1929, December 2nd.

<sup>5</sup> *Bonne Presse* Collection, p. 393.

<sup>6</sup> *Osservatore Romano*, February 2nd, 1934.

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has nowhere been canonically defined, but the fullest definition we possess is that contained in an otherwise unimportant letter written a short time before the one addressed to Cardinal Bertram; it is dated July 20th, 1928. Here Catholic Action is described as '*The part taken by the Catholic laity in the apostolic mission of the Church with the object of defending the principles of Faith and Morals and of spreading a sane and beneficial social action so as to restore Catholic Life in the home and in Society. This is to be done under the guidance of the hierarchy of the Church, outside and above all party politics.*' Before plunging into an analysis of the essential notes of this 'real apostolate which differs little from the divine mission of the priesthood' it will be as well to point out that despite the constant assurance that there is nothing novel about this co-operation of layfolk there is throughout a note of urgency. The movement arises from the needs of the day and is intended to take the fullest advantage of conditions hitherto unknown or unexplored.

This feature is intimately connected with the question of the *mandate from the hierarchy* which is the first requisite. The first step must come from the Bishops, who are supreme in their Sees. Clearly where conditions are not propitious there can be no formal Catholic Action since there are no auxiliaries to delegate authority to. On the other hand a new spiritual force is called into being so soon as the hierarchy moves. A moral entity is created with an existence apart from its members. Père Dabin goes so far as to contemplate the eventual addition of a new section to the Code of Canon Law which would govern the new 'lay ministers,' but without waiting for that day it is imperative to settle the nature of this body to whom authority is to be delegated.

The name *laity* is derived from the Greek *λαϊκος* which was equivalent to our 'man-in-the-street.' First used by St. Clement of Rome in its catholic sense of non-cleric, it has never come to be defined by the Church. If then every non-cleric is eligible it is not all who can in practice be entrusted with the responsibility of an *active* apostolate.

That is why the ranks of Catholic Action will muster picked men and women of known probity so imbued with the principles of Catholic Faith and Morals as to be worthy teachers thereof. But since the scope of Catholic Action is as universal as that of the Church itself there will be found within those same ranks room for a great variety of talents.

Once it is decided to proclaim Catholic Action the exact method adopted must depend upon the regulations of the Hierarchy. The amount of responsibilities confided to the laity must vary with the circumstances, such as the numbers of vocations, the education of the laity, etc. The success of the movement will rest upon the shoulders of the laity. This *res laicorum* requires careful definition if scruples and doubts are to be obviated. The exact measure of participation and co-operation has been analysed by Père Dabin in his work *L'Apostolate Laïque*<sup>7</sup> and more recently by a diocesan council at Lille.<sup>8</sup> The comparison recently made by the Pope between the lay apostolate and the work of the native clergy in the mission-fields serves, perhaps better than any other, to indicate the penetrative nature of the work contemplated by the inspirer of the movement. Repeatedly this ability to go where priests cannot enter has been made the subject of addresses, notably to bodies of women and to professional catechists, similar to the C.E.G. and C.S.G.

It is perhaps superfluous to stress the essentially social nature of the work, but since the Holy Father never tires of repeating that 'it must rightly deserve the name of Social Action,' it will be as well to point out the illuminating reference to Catholic Action to be found in the Encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*. After reiterating the means by which the great scheme of reform is to be achieved, a reliance is placed not so much on Catholic Action itself—for it is essentially a formative organization—as upon those who are

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<sup>7</sup> Published by Bloud & Gay, 1931.

<sup>8</sup> The article entitled *Un laboratoire d'Action Catholique, Vie Intellectuelle*, 1933, p. 216.

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formed into zealous promoters of the peace of Christ by its effective teaching. This element of social or other-than-personal progress necessarily must proceed in two steps: one of formation and one of activity. But there is no reason why the stages should be successive, indeed experience indicates that one helps the other to a great extent.

This object is considerably facilitated by means of the co-ordination and organization which results from the creation of a 'hierarchy of action.' There are critics who dispute the necessity and the value of a large unitary organism, preferably on a national scale, but if only to present a united front to the forces of evil some such means is necessary. Apart from this, harmony and efficiency are invaluable in themselves. The divorce of methodical organization from matters of faith results from a failure to realize that 'faith-energy,' like steam or electricity, has to be controlled in order to produce effective force.

Quality rather than quantity is recommended at first as the objective of those entrusted with the formation of members. This does not mean that the work should begin when the machinery is under-staffed, but rather that the 'key-men,' acting as liaison officers, will require special formation. The whole question of recruiting members now opens up. Who is eligible? Every man, woman and child who has any apostolic zeal to contribute to the cause. We will not discuss the position where they are already engaged upon good works before the advent of Catholic Action proper. In that case they become incorporated and carry on as before. New link-committees may have to be created but there will be little difference felt unless it be a feeling of greater solidarity. The case of the parish or diocese where recruits have to be instructed in large numbers involves the familiar methods of instruction and formation which ever depend upon the zeal and efficiency of the individuals entrusted with this delicate task. In most cases the work will fall upon an already busy priest who has only little time and few opportunities for a study of the theory of the new movement. Where he is sympathetic, however, literature from headquarters and an occasional visit from trained

leaders should suffice to establish the nucleus of Catholic Action by means of a small committee of workers. Here the supporters of the 'Old Gang Theory' have to be met. Plainly Catholic Action must act, *i.e.* it must draw in new members and spread its influence abroad. The work will not be easy at first, but this modern apostolate is placed upon us as an obligation, it is no spare-time occupation. The Pope's words to the priests are equally applicable to those whom they will mutually form: 'You undertake an arduous task but you also will reap special consolations. Catholic Action is in your hands. It is for you to make it into the success which it is bound to be if it is undertaken with zeal.' Cardinal Verdier when he set up Catholic Action in 1930 told his priests that in the *practice* of Catholic Action they must no longer act like tyrants ruling by divine right but rather as constitutional monarchs. In this we touch bed-rock. Just as there can be no *formal* Catholic Action without the mandate of the hierarchy so there can be no *active* Catholic Action without the sympathetic stimulus of the clergy. Since the laity cannot act without a head it is the leaders who must take the initiative—once formed and started upon their work the laity will have to shoulder the responsibilities of office and then the fruitful aid will justify the labour of formation.

It is not easy to remain on the right side of the fence when discussing theory as opposed to practice. Monsignor Civardi has divided his *Manuale dell' Azione Cattolica* into two volumes, one on either side, but it must be confessed that the *Teoria* would be less well-understood without the *Pratica* than vice versa. The fact that Catholic Action—in the strict sense—has come into being mainly as a natural development should ensure an early flowering of new works. 'L'union fait la force,' say the French, and none realize this better than the men and women 'who are anxious to restore Catholic life to the home and to Society under the guidance of the hierarchy.' And the young for whose sake this is to be done will not be slow to realize the value of the principles which prompt this essentially Social Action.

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