

THE "MILIEU" OF CATHOLIC ACTION

THE word "milieu" is one of those expressive French words which, to a large extent, defies translation into English. In the present connection it might be rendered, though inadequately, as the sphere of life, the atmosphere, the surroundings or the environment in which the individual Catholic habitually finds himself. If he is an apostle of Catholic Action it must be largely in this *milieu*, in these surroundings, that he exercises his apostolate. Hence the word "milieu" is of supreme importance to the proper understanding of Catholic Action, as the actual sphere of life is to the exercise of the apostolate.

For Catholic Action is essentially conditioned by the circumstances of our natural human lives. It is indeed precisely because the priest cannot enter into certain circles and so supernaturalize the lives of those who frequent them that the Pope appeals to the laity to take up this task and continue amongst their own friends and working companions the apostolate of the hierarchy. "In order to bring back to Christ these whole classes of men who have denied Him, we must gather and train *from amongst their very ranks* auxiliary soldiers of the Church . . . the first and 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." The apostolate must be exercised, according to the Pope, in the circles of our every-day life. It is only natural. Rightly or wrongly there are class-differences and the life and interests of one class are different from those of another. In our democratic country it is easier than elsewhere to move from one class to another and to find oneself accepted in a class higher than that into which one was born, but it is quite impossible to enter into one sphere of life and exert an influence there while remaining to a great extent in another. A labourer may become Prime Minister, but not while he remains a labourer. But the word "milieu" must not be identified with social status. It means much more than that;

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it may even be a question of age, or of industrial or professional interests. Socially the doctor is the equal of the solicitor, but they move in different circles during the greater part of their lives. Catholic Action must take account of these differences of class, profession or age, and work with methods which are diversified according to these conditions.

This is a question of immediate importance, for we have not only to face indifference and apathy but the very positive forces of atheistic Communism which are already ranged against us and with the same effective weapons. Being wiser in their day than the children of light, they have been quick to realize the importance of the *milieu* for their own activity and they are at work everywhere with methods precisely adapted to each class and even for differences of national feeling. In India natives trained in Europe spread propaganda among their fellow countrymen and, by representing Moscow as the defender of ancient national liberties against British Imperialism, win many disciples to their anti-God movement. In Belgium school children, trained in Communistic ideas, are urged to spread these among their companions, and precise methods of work are explained to them. In Great Britain the organization is not so complete nor effective, but essentially the same method of approach through the proper *milieu* is adopted. Communist workingmen especially are encouraged to spread discontent in the factories and to insist that there will never be happiness for the worker until Capitalism is overthrown by violence and bloodshed. For the intellectuals there is Communist art and drama to attract them and inspire them with the same subversive and atheistic ideas. Much more effective and more to be feared is the quiet, persistent activity of these men working in their own particular spheres than the public meetings and demonstrations of Communism.

Communism gives us an example and a challenge. An example of the most effective method of influencing the world, a challenge to overcome the power of Antichrist by using the same methods to spread the love of Jesus Crucified. Catholic Action working in diverse spheres, but above all among the workers, is the most important means of

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combatting this diabolical force; the Communists themselves have admitted their fear of the organized action of the *Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne* in France, which has adopted precisely the same methods and goes to work exactly in that *milieu* where Communism is most anxious to succeed.

The J.O.C. has followed the example and taken up the challenge. Other forms of Catholic Action too are waging war against the forces of Communism in other lands and in different classes. But the object of Catholic Action is not solely to combat Communism but to re-establish the kingdom of God so far as this is possible on earth, to re-ignite Faith, to enlighten the ignorant, to direct the leaders of the world in the ways of Divine Justice and Love.

Towards this end much has already been accomplished. The J.O.C. in France arose from the realization that by neglecting the idea of the *milieu* the working classes had largely been lost to the Faith. The aristocratic families had remained Catholic but had been incapable of influencing the lives of the industrial workers with whom they had no contact. The movement spread out therefore from a number of workers who had retained their fervour and were able to act as apostles in their own industrial surroundings. Since enthusiasm and fervour are essentially the qualities of youth, this movement was and is largely a youth movement. There was a need among the workers and the need is being met. But it is not only among the workers that this apostolate is exercised. Catholic Action must enter into all spheres and therefore its leaders in France and Belgium have carefully provided apostles for these other spheres. So have arisen the *Jeunesse Indépendente*, *Jeunesse Etudiante*, *Jeunesse Agricole*, each working in its own proper sphere. And these are not isolated movements. Accepting the situation as it is, their influence is directed towards members of distinct classes, but in their origin they are united. Directed by the hierarchy of the Church which is essentially one, they are united by the heads of each movement and by the common influence of the same grace and faith which comes from Christ. Even apart from this *ad hoc* organization there are several outstanding examples of effective Catholic Action

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in a definite *milieu* where the apostle has seized his opportunity to supernaturalize those of his own circle to the benefit of many far beyond that circle. It is not long ago that Mr. De Valera in a magnificent speech exhorted the League to hold a peace conference in advance of the Italian-Abyssinian war, bringing out the Catholic ideals of peace to the admiration of all present and of many who heard or read of that speech later. In his own appropriate *milieu* without controversy or prejudice he impressed on others Catholic thought and went far towards influencing deeds in accordance with Catholic ideals. A still greater example was that of Engelbert Dollfuss who saved Austria by directing its government, the sphere to which God had called him, according to Catholic Truth and in the spirit of Christ's love.

These two examples are outstanding and well known. It is not to be expected that the lesser apostles of Catholic Action should be famous. Nevertheless they are at work in every sphere. In our own country the Catholic Social Guild especially has recognized the importance of the *milieu* and trains the laity in the solution of social questions precisely in order that in their workshops and offices, in their schools and societies, they may bring home to others the Social Teaching of the Catholic Church. There are these specially trained workers and there are others, who perhaps are not attached to any particular organization, who are really carrying on in their different spheres of life the apostolate of Catholic Action. There are even now teachers in council schools, supernaturalizing (not proselytizing) the citizens of the future, there are Catholic representatives in Parliament who are not enslaved to party programmes but are ready to speak out boldly when a principle of morality is at stake, there are social welfare workers who give to public philanthropy a supernatural tinge and bring the burning charity of Our Lord into their work. There are also Catholic doctors, nurses, lawyers and judges acting indeed according to the rules of their profession, but, inspired always by the love of Christ and a deep Catholic faith, attracting others to that love and introducing them to that faith by their holy example and quiet suggestions.

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There are such apostles actively occupied with the task of supernaturalizing the lives of our indifferent and hopeless or violently antagonistic modern pagans. There are these apostles, but not yet in sufficient numbers. There are still too many who are not inspired with the idea of the apostolate, who are too shy to speak about the Faith, too weak to show example to those who do not share our strengthening grace. They should realize that, even if they are unable to participate in organized Catholic Action, in one or other of our established societies, they are still obliged to be apostles to the best of their ability and most particularly amongst their own daily companions. In these surroundings the persistent application of Catholic principles, the constant example of a good Catholic life and the repeated tactful explanations of the Catholic viewpoint must achieve great results which are at once more immediate, more abundant and far-reaching than those obtained by other methods.

They are more immediate. The repeated and daily contact with those of our own environment is bound to achieve more speedy results than occasional meetings with those who normally live in a different sphere. These results become more quickly apparent for we can actually see them appearing as time goes on, the breaking down of prejudice, the realization of higher values, the raising of a soul to the supernatural state, perhaps even a conversion to the Catholic Church. And this persistent and constant activity brings about a greater abundance of results precisely because it is repeated and regular. Constant rubbing wears away the stone; an occasional touch leaves it intact. They are more far-reaching. The person to whom we convey these Catholic ideals may be in contact with those of other circles and will bring to them something of the Catholic life he has absorbed. This power for good will be increased if there are already Catholic apostles at work in these other circles. So gradually does Catholic Action, adapted to and working in each particular section of society, permeate with supernatural life an entire community and even spreads itself across national frontiers.

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