

CATHOLIC ACTION AND THE WORKERS

THE Holy Father's ideas concerning Catholic Action have not always been fully understood or exactly interpreted. This is especially true with regard to the relations between Catholic Action, as he envisages it, and the Catholic Social Movement which traces its origin to Leo XIII. It has even been asserted that there is a difference, not to say divergence, between the thought of the two Popes, and that Catholic Action is to supersede the Catholic workers' organizations, which, it is maintained, have become infected with the materialism they set out to combat, and have, although rejecting class war, brought into the Catholic community a principle of class division inimical to unity among Catholics.¹ On this view, Catholic Action, universal and spiritual, comes as a happy substitute for the social movement inaugurated by Leo XIII.

Others, themselves involved in the workers' organizations, are apt to consider social action as the highest if not the only form of Catholic Action, forgetting that the term has been given by Pius XI a specific technical meaning which, if not entirely new, conveys a new significance—'the participation of the laity in the hierarchical apostolate of the Church.'

If we seek for the origins of the term 'Catholic Action,' it cannot be denied that there is continuity between the thought of the last five Popes. Pius IX on various occasions called for action from Catholics; Leo XIII exhorted at once to Christian social democratic action and to Catholic action;

¹ The writer has in mind a situation which, while not obtaining in Great Britain, has been the occasion of difficulties and friction in several continental countries where it is sometimes felt, especially by the younger generation, that the Catholic trades-unions, political parties, etc., have involved the Church too deeply in worldly affairs. To these the establishment of definitely non-political Catholic Action has been extremely welcome. It is this that explains the fact that the dissolution of the Centre Party and the Catholic trades-unions in Germany was greeted with something like enthusiasm by many German Catholics.—(Ed.)

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Pius X above all anticipated Pius XI in numerous letters on Catholic action, which in his mind has for its supreme object 'the practical solution of the social problem according to Christian principles,' and which he therefore styled 'Catholic Social Action.' Benedict XV continued to link together social action and Catholic action without more precisely defining the meaning of the latter. It was Pius XI who, from his first Encyclical *Ubi Arcano Dei*, gave a concise definition of Catholic Action, so that the phrase can now be used, even in Concordats, without further comment or explanation. While its meaning is thus, so to say, almost canonically defined, we can nevertheless study the numerous applications of the term.

Catholic Action is lay action. While priests and religious have, by their ordination and profession, their place and function in the life of the Church, the laity has also its peculiar mission and responsibility. The Master's call is addressed to *every* member of the Church: *Go ye also into my vineyard*. It is the 'Pentecost of the whole Church,' says Cardinal Faulhaber; not an apostolate to or for the laity, but *by* the laity. They are recalled to their rightful responsibility.

It is a question of *action*, and therefore the organizations which are concerned solely with developing the interior life, such as Sodalties, are not organisms of Catholic Action in the fullest sense. 'Catholic Action presupposes this interior formation, since it is and always must be the basis of all exterior activity, and precisely for this reason all such associations have been raised by the Holy Father to the rank of auxiliaries of Catholic Action,'² which does not itself belong to the domain of the interior life, but consists in the active participation of the laity in the actual apostolate of the Church. This apostolate is not merely a collaboration but an extension and continuation of the work of the Church itself, with which its objective and scope coincide. Catholic Action is directed in the first

² Mgr. Pizzardo, *cf. L'Action Catholique—Essai de Synthèse*. P. Dabin, S.J. (Paris, 1929).

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place to the salvation of souls, and other interests and activities only concern it in the measure of their value in this regard. Thus social and political questions *can* become the object of Catholic Action in the degree to which spiritual values are involved or imperilled.

The distinctive character of Catholic Action lies in its close connection with the hierarchy, and only by being thus integrated with the hierarchical apostolate can any undertaking rightly be thus described. It does not by any means follow that no work which is not thus linked with the hierarchy is useless or wrong; the concept of the apostolate is wider than that of Catholic Action, and there are absolutely necessary forms of apostolate of which the Bishops do not intend to take on the direction or responsibility.

Until the time of Benedict XV Catholic Action and social action were thought of as practically identical. There is no doubt that Catholic Action, in the mind of the present Pope, has taken on a wider significance, giving to the laity a part in the redemptive mission of the Church, and is therefore concentrated entirely on eternal, spiritual values. United with the Hierarchy, Catholic Action is the exercise of the High-Priestly mission of Jesus Christ for the salvation of souls. But for this very reason it cannot be indifferent to affairs of secular life. The religion of the Incarnation is obliged to concern itself with the regeneration of society when social abuses and disorders hinder the way to grace and glory. And can it be gainsaid that to-day it is not so much Trinitarian or Christological heresies that hinder the salvation of souls as social heresies and disorders? Cardinal Mercier used to say that society itself is in a state of apostasy. The great Dutch social leader, Mgr. Poels has clearly stated this crucial problem: In nearly every country the Church has seen an increase in the numbers and quality of the religious Orders, of institutions, schools and good works, and has nevertheless experienced at the same time a lessening influence on society and on public life. It is a curious and tragic phenomenon—interior vitality increasing and exterior expansion diminishing, paganism growing around us, for no one can say that

modern culture is Christian. While the interior life of the Church reaches perhaps greater intensity than it ever has done hitherto, she has not been able to actualise her vital force in modern life. To quote Mgr. Poels again: 'We draw our power from the altar, but our battle awaits us outside the Church, in the *mêlée* of social life.'

In an audience given to Canon Cardyn, the founder of *Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne* (J.O.C.) Pius XI referred to the fact that the Church had lost touch with the greater part of the working classes as the greatest scandal of the nineteenth century. Professor Dr. J. P. Steffes, in a work entitled *Religion and Religiosity the great Problem of the Capitalist Age*, demonstrates the intimate connection between the spirit and the consequences of capitalism on the one hand and the religious and spiritual crisis on the other. A Dutch author, Dr. J. P. Kruyt, himself a Marxist, has written of the phenomenon of the abandonment of religious practice in Holland, where official statistics and inquiries make possible a serious investigation. Among the causes of this forsaking of the practice of religion he gives first place to 'the social discontent.' In Belgium eighty per cent. to ninety per cent. of the workers, though baptized and educated as Christians, neglect their religious duties. In France the inquiry made recently by *La Vie Intellectuelle* shows the same fact; the social disorder has avenged itself on the Faith, the mass of the people have turned their back on the Church.

Here is indeed a vast field for Catholic Action, for the apostolic activity of the laity. And it is open to the laity alone. It is often said that Catholic Action, by encouraging the collaboration of the laity, has for its aim to make up for the shortage of priests. This is true, but even where there are enough priests it is not possible for them to cope with the working masses. For two reasons: More often than not the direct action of the priest on the people is made impossible by their distrust of him, he is looked on as an associate of capitalism, a protector of vested interests. And even if he can penetrate into the slums and deal with these wandering sheep, bringing back an individual here and

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there—while he will no doubt share the joy of the Good Shepherd—the essential problem will not be solved, for it is not a matter first of all of individual conversions, albeit the salvation of each one is always his chief end. It is a matter rather of rechristianizing the atmosphere, the surroundings, the conditions of life and work and society. And here is a second reason why the apostolate of the clergy is inadequate and why the lay apostolate alone is effective: the priest cannot exercise a lasting and definite action on the different spheres of social life which need to be reformed. For that lay apostles are needed who themselves belong to these *milieux* and can work like the leaven in the lump.

This leads inevitably to what the Pope calls the 'principle of specialization'—action *in* and *through* the social environment, which, in the technique of Catholic Action, is becoming more and more important. '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,' says the Pope in *Quadragesimo Anno*. Frequently in his discourses he uses this idea of a strategy which resembles that of the Communists, the formation of cells and centres, a strategy which has been applied by the J.O.C. in Belgium with a success which has excited the envy of the Communists themselves.

This 'principle of specialization' in the working of Catholic Action, while it holds good for all, is supremely important for the working classes. The history of the social movement is full of instances which demonstrate this. At the beginning of Catholic social action the experiment was made of what was called in *Rerum Novarum* and is still called the 'mixed association,' consisting of both employers and employed. This kind of action has proved to be useless and has had to be abandoned. Léon Harmel, that saintly employer, had realized this when he took as the motto for his social action: 'the attainment of the welfare of the worker by the worker, always with him, never without him and especially never in spite of him.'³

³ Henry Somerville, *The Catholic Social Movement*, p. 138.

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Must we then establish new industrial organizations vowed to Catholic Action, or are we to use to this end the existing organizations? The answer is not the same for all countries; it is for the hierarchy in each country to say whether the present associations can be thus used or whether new ones must be formed. In those countries where a dictatorship obtains, and labour organizations have been suppressed, the hierarchy will no doubt try, if they can, to create some kind of Catholic Action in the working classes as in others. In other countries such as England, there are organizations such as the Catholic Social Guild which, concerned with the propagation of Catholic social doctrine, seem cut out for a place in a general Catholic Action movement. In countries such as France and Belgium and Holland the Catholic workers' organizations involve activities and undertakings directed to purely social or economic ends, Syndicates and Co-operative and Assurance Societies. Directly or indirectly these associations take part in politics, and it goes without saying that they do not pertain to the hierarchical apostolate and that it is not desirable for the Bishops to have direct control of them. Thus they are not part of Catholic Action properly so called, though their activities undoubtedly make for the good of the Church.

But whatever form of organization be adopted, Catholic Action in the working classes demands before all else, as Pius XI explains, a body of priests specially trained in social science and imbued with the charity of Christ, whose chief duty shall be to gather and train and inspire lay apostles from among the workers themselves by means of special and parochial retreats, devotional week ends, study circles and so on, recreating a Christian ideology and bringing the workers into touch with the life of the Church. At all costs the Church must regain the proletariat to help and save it, so that in our own time the prophecy we read at Christmas time may be again fulfilled: *Populus in tenebris vidit lucem magnam*. The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light.

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(Translated by M. A. Bousfield).