

"LAY APOSTOLATE" AND "CATHOLIC ACTION"

Article taken from Pages 10,11, 12,13, of Bulletin, No. 2. August 15, 1956, pub. by the Permanent Committee for the Lay Apostolate.



.....

How often we have been asked: "Why do you organize congresses for 'Lay Apostolate?' - "Do you mean the same as 'Catholic Action'?" - "Is it because some countries are not developed enough for real Catholic Action?"..... Sometimes our puzzled interlocutors are used only to the term "Catholic Action" (the President of Catholic Action of the Philippines felt the need to write a booklet on the occasion of the recent meeting in Manila in order to present the term "Lay Apostolate" to his fellow-countrymen); at other times, they have not had contact at all with "Catholic Action" in the stricter sense, and are curious to know if what we present is "it"!

Our purpose in these few lines is obviously not to go into the complex theological problems underlying such an apparently simple expression as the "Lay Apostolate" nor into those connected with "Catholic Action". There is "work in progress" in theological circles which we hope will clarify many issues even before the Second World Congress. It may be useful, however, to recall here a principle and to state a few relevant facts.

Catholic Action, "the official lay apostolate"

For the principle, we cannot do better than refer to the Holy Father's Address to the First World Congress for the Lay Apostolate where it is crystal clear that, if every Catholic has the obligation to be an "apostle", not every Catholic has the duty to belong to an organized form of lay apostolate, much less to an organization of Catholic Action, the "official lay apostolate" (1).

Speaking at the Asian Meeting in Manila, His Eminence Cardinal Gracias, clearly stated the same principle: "This Meeting is wisely called the First Asian Lay Apostolate Meeting, and its scope is therefore wider than that of Catholic Action proper. It is fundamental to remember that everyone is called to the Lay Apostolate by the very fact that he is a Christian, and through the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation. Catholic Action, therefore, does not create the Lay Apostolate; it simply uses it. Catholic Action demands no new powers, no share in the government by the Authority of the Church. It is the Catholic laity with definite duties, assigned by the Hierarchy". (2).

(1) See booklet; Pius XII speaks on the Lay Apostolate, pub. by the Per. Cttee.

(2) Acts - First Asian Meeting for the Apostolate of the Laity, p.66.

In the course of the same Meeting, Mgr. Pavan gave as it were the touchstone of "Catholic Action": "two elements which may be considered essential; if either one is lacking, we cannot say that we have Catholic Action. They are: 1) the mandate of the Hierarchy; 2) action which is essentially 'ecclesial' (from Ecclesia - Church: action in the field of dogma, morals, liturgy, education, charitable works)." (3).

A wealth of initiative, and a confusion of ideas.

When Pius XI issued his "call to Catholic Action" in 1922, there was little, in most countries, in the way of organised apostolate of the laity. There were Confraternities and pious societies; there were charitable "works" and catechetical activity, but there was not wide realisation of the scope and possibilities of a real lay "apostolate".

In the years that followed, in response to the call of the Sovereign Pontif, the idea of a "collaboration of the laity in the apostolate of the Hierarchy" penetrated to the most remote corners of the globe; and gradually, the "idea" found concrete realisation - often, it must be admitted, in forms which depended on chance contacts and haphazard reading rather than on original study of a concrete local situation in relation to the Apostolate.

It was only natural that Italian Catholic Action, directly mandated by the Holy See, should be taken as a model in many instances; its "general" or "unitary" (non-specialised) form would then be applied - with branches created for men, women, young men and young women - often, but not always with great profit. More often - at least in English-speaking countries, where French is more widely understood than Italian - the "call to Catholic Action" was heard almost simultaneously with the discovery of French or Belgian "specialised" forms: "authentic Catholic Action" and the JOC became practically synonymous - once again, not without great profit, but at times perhaps to the exclusion of other necessary developments.

Today - to quote Mgr. Pavan again: ".....there are not two single nations in which Catholic Action has exactly the same form of organisation... In some countries, General Catholic Action is predominant, in others Specialised Catholic Action. This is due to the fact that at times the tendency is to give priority to what is common to all Catholics: questions of faith and morals, liturgy, the spirit of the Gospels, the fundamental rights of the person, the family, the Church; the organisations chosen will thus be for General Catholic Action. At other times, there will be a tendency to stress the importance of the profession or the milieu, and this will lead to the setting up of associations for Specialised Catholic Action. We can say, however, that in all nations where there is a vitally active Catholic Action movement, both these motives are operative: the need to express and to create a greater awareness of what is common to all Catholics, and the need to adapt the Apostolate to different circumstances and requirements. In Italy, for instance, General C.A. predominates; but within the C.A. youth organisations,

(3) Acts, p. 91.



whether masculine or feminine - there are specialised sections for working youth, rural youth, student youth" (4). (There are also, in Italy, specialised branches of C.A. for university students and intellectuals, and professional organisations which are "emanations" of C.A.). In the same way, if France has become mainly identified with Specialised C.C. (JOC, JEC, JAC, JIC, JMC....for youth; ACO, ACI, MRF, for adults), not only is there provision for contact and collaboration between these various organisations, but there are also two nationwide federations of General C.A. (for men and women respectively) based essentially on the Parish.

In addition to C.A. proper, however - and largely through the influence of the C.A. Movements - the idea of the lay apostolate" has taken shape over the past decades in a host of ways which do not come under C.A. in the formal sense. Some of these forms are too specifically concerned with "social action" to be ever "mandated as C.A." under the direct responsibility of the Hierarchy. Others are forms of religious, charitable or educational activity which may have existed before C.A. as such, but which have since come into being or developed in a truly "apostolic" sense, without necessarily soliciting, or obtaining, a "mandate" from the Hierarchy for C.A.

For historical or local reasons, organisations (Sodalities of Our Lady (5), Legion of Mary, Scouts, St. Vincent de Paul Society, etc.) which may be "Catholic Action" in one country or diocese, may be regarded elsewhere as "auxiliary forms of Lay Apostolate", without any perceptible difference in their activity or efficacy. And, where such organisations are recognised as C.A., it may be within a third type: neither General nor Specialised, but Federative C.A. The clearest example is Catholic Action of the Philippines, which groups, at the disposal of the Hierarchy, 12 mandated Organisations including almost all forms of Lay Apostolate already mentioned.

## Fundação Cuidar o Futuro

It may be clearer now how a certain confusion has at times arisen concerning "Catholic Action" and "Lay Apostolate", a confusion which authoritative statements such as those quoted above will help to dissipate. After what has been said, it should be clearer, too, what is the role - and the necessity - of "lay ecclesiastical congresses" which can bring together, on the world or regional level all those people working for the one Apostolate of the Church, enabling them to study together - across frontiers of organisation and of theoretical definitions - the concrete situations with which they are faced and the means at their disposal. Forms of organisation are certainly not interchangeable in the apostolate - they will be effective or ineffective according as they are adapted to the needs - but they remain always instrumental - at the service of the Church and of Her Mission in the world.

(4) Acts - p. 91.

(5) Numbered by H.H. Pope Pius XII "among the most authentic forms of C.A." (Address to the International Congress of the Sodalities, Rome, 8-9-'954.

