

"LAY APOSTOLATE" AND "CATHOLIC ACTION"

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 right 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)

In the course of the same Meeting, Msgr. 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 organized apostolate of the laity. —There were Confraternities and pious societies; there were charitable "works" and catechetical activity, but there was not wide realization of the scope and possibilities of a real lay "apostolate".

- (1) See also the Booklet: Pius XII Speaks on the Lay Apostolate, published by the Permanent Committee.
- (2) Acts - First Asian Meeting for the Apostolate of the Laity, p.66.
- (3) Ibid., p.91.



In the years that followed, in response to the call of the Sovereign Pontiffs, 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 realization - 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-specialized) 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 "specialized" 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 again Msgr. Pavan : "... there are not two single nations in which Catholic Action has exactly the same form of organization ... In some countries, General Catholic Action is predominant, in others Specialized 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 organizations 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 Specialized Catholic Action. We can say, however, that in all nations where there is a vital Catholic Action movement, both these motives are operative : the need to express and/create a greater awareness of what is common to all Catholics, and the need to adapt the Apostolate to particular circumstances and requirements. In Italy, for instance, General Catholic Action predominates; but within the C.A. youth organizations - whether masculine or feminine - there are specialized sections for working youth, rural youth, student youth." (4) (There exist also specialized branches/for university students and intellectuals, and professional organizations which are "emanations" of C.A.;). In the same way, if France has become mainly identified with Specialized C.A. (JOC, JEC, JIC, JAC, JMC for the youth; and now, ACI, ACC, MRF for adults), there is not only provision for contact and collaboration between these various organizations, but there are also two nationwide federations of General Catholic Action (for men and women respectively) based essentially on the Parish.

In addition to Catholic Action 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~~ come under Catholic Action 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 Catholic Action as such, but which have since ~~come into being~~ come into being or developed in a truly "apostolic" sense, without necessarily soliciting, or obtaining, a "mandate" of C.A.

(4) Acts - First Asian Meeting for the Apostolate of the Laity, p.91.

A study of the history of "Catholic Action" as we know it now in Italy, and its development within the Italian "Catholic movement" as a whole would throw much



For historical or local reasons, organizations (Sodalties of Our Lady, 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} real difference in their activity or their efficacy. And, where such organizations are recognized as Catholic Action, it is generally within a third type of Catholic Action : neither "General" nor "Specialized", but "Federative". The clearest example is Catholic Action of the Philippines which groups, at the disposal of the Hierarchy, 12 mandated Organizations, including almost all forms of lay apostolate already mentioned (Young Christian Workers, Legion of Mary, Sodalties of Our Lady, Catholic Women's League ...).

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Perhaps it may be clearer now how a certain confusion has at times arisen in ideas concerning "Catholic Action" and "Lay Apostolate", a confusion which authoritative statements such as those quoted above will help to dissipate. It should be clearer, too, what is the role - and the necessity - of "lay apostolate congresses" whihc can bring together, on the world or regional level, all those lay people who are working witxin for the one Apostolate of the Church, enabling them to study together - across the frontiers of organization and of theoretical definitions - the concrete situations with which they are faced and the means at their disposal. Forms of organization 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.

Fundação Cuidar o Futuro

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