

*TOWARDS A SPIRITUALITY FOR THE LAY APOSTLE*

The vitality of the Catholic Church is most apparent in times of crisis. It seems that when she is confronted by the gravest of dangers she finds new life and strength, and emerges stronger than ever. After the break-up of the Roman Empire, she was faced with the task of civilizing and Christianizing a barbarian Europe. She did so through the establishment of the monastic orders and thus became the builder of a Western Christian civilization. After the Protestant revolution, when, bruised and bleeding, she faced a divided Christendom, she found new strength and effected her own counter-reformation. Today, in this twentieth century, she has been faced with a most formidable challenge, hurled out by a modern, materialistic society. The Church today is faced with the danger of a society that has been divorced from its foundations and Christian traditions, and is now so secular that it constitutes a threat to the souls of her members.

The Roman Catholic Church has an answer. She has no intention of returning to the catacombs. She has a plan of the utmost daring. It is not to eliminate one evil, or to emphasize one virtue, or to establish a new religious order with one specific purpose. It is, on the contrary, a master plan.

She calls upon her laity, her lay members, to unite in a great apostolate. She has asked them to take their place in the Church as active militant Christians. She has asked the laity to stir up those graces which are theirs by their participation in the priesthood of Christ and to give themselves as lay people to the works of the apostolate. Their task has been made clear. They are to restore all things in Christ. And so today we have a new force in the Church, an organized body of laity who constitute an apostolic army, a lay apostolate.

It is natural, therefore, that we should be concerned with the spiritual life which is to be that of the lay apostle. As in the past so much concentration and thought was given to the formation and development of the spirituality proper to the religious life, so today there is need of our seeking to apply the principles of the spiritual life to the field of the lay apostolate. In this way will true apostles be developed. Only in this way will they be guided to their proper activity and to the perfection of their lives. And when we speak of a spirituality peculiar to the lay apostolate we can not mean one essentially different from that of the priest or religious. All spiritual systems have a common purpose, to lead the soul to union with God. The lay apostle is called to the perfection of charity. He shares in the same blessed invitation of Christ, "Be ye therefore perfect, as



also your heavenly Father is perfect," (Matt. 5.48). He receives grace from the Holy Sacrifice and from the sacraments. He may have the same devotions and spiritual exercises — as meditation, prayer to Our Blessed Mother, — but the spirituality of the lay apostle should differ in its operation, in its basic outlook, in the virtues emphasized.

That there should be a spirituality proper to the apostolate is due to the activity to which such apostles are called. Lay apostles are called to an apostolic life in the world. Their vocation is not to flee from the world, but to live in it, to be concerned with it, and to conquer it. The object of their apostolic activity is the christianization of the environment. For example, there may be a particular evil in a locality that constitutes a danger to the souls in the community. The lay apostle is to be actively concerned with this. He must analyze the problem, act on its sensibility and objectively, and seek to effect a solution. And in all of this he must be prepared to go against an accepted standard of conduct and to meet the opposition of others.

It cannot be stressed too much that lay apostles must be concerned with life in the world. This is what the times demand. "What is needed is an apostolic laity gradually coming to influence and change the texture of values of the world and thus preparing it, nowever remotely, for that change of mind and heart which will dispose it, socially as well as individually, to grace." (De la Bedoyere, Michael. *"The Layman in the Church."* p.9.) How often we resolve a problem by suggesting as the solution prayer and good example. We must not ever minimize the necessity and power of prayer. Prayer must accompany any other good work, but — it must be accompanied by that work. The 'good example' proposed is often that of a rather passive Christian, probably one concerned with his own salvation but rather oblivious of the spiritual welfare of his neighbors. The example that must be given is that of the disinterested, charitable Catholic who is deeply and sincerely concerned with his fellow man and who is willing to make sacrifices to help those in need. No matter how lofty their sentiments, if no effective action is taken the problem will still exist. Lay apostles are called to action. They are to restore all things in Christ; And "All Things" is a very extensive term.

The first and most necessary virtue for the lay apostle is charity. Love of Christ must pervade and nourish all apostolic works. Only true charity will give the motivation for effective activity. Only true love of neighbor will give the apostle that necessary interest in the welfare of others. It must be an ardent charity. And it must be practical and penetrating, in that the individual will apply the principles of this virtue to all the details of complex human existence.



Apostles should truly hunger and thirst for justice. True love of neighbour will give this spiritual hunger for all that is good, and this hunger will be satisfied only when evil is removed, good is brought about, and society rebuilt on a Christian foundation.

Those engaged in the work of Catholic Action live not according to the standards of a secular society, but according to the gospel of Christ. Their very vocation means that they cannot be satisfied with the status quo but must seek for change, for improvement. Consequently they must be prepared to meet opposition. Criticism must be expected. Lay apostles may be categorized as 'goody-goodies', as being puritanical. Even the most sincere efforts may be misunderstood, and by well-meaning people. Lay apostles must not be deterred by such criticism or by fear. They must practice and perfect, therefore, the virtue of fortitude. By this virtue souls are enabled to overcome fear and human respect; and they are so strengthened in the pursuit of good that they will undertake and complete arduous tasks for Christ. The lay apostle who possesses this virtue will fear, not to displease others, but to displease God. And he or she will seek true glory and honor, that which proceeds from loyalty to God and fidelity to duty.

Is it not asking too much of our Catholic laity to undertake the task of the restoration of society? Is not such a burden too great for them to bear? The very immensity of the task could deter even the bravest of souls. But lay apostles will not hesitate, will not delay, if they have an appreciation of the Mystical Body of Christ. This great truth must be a reality to each and every person engaged in the apostolate. In the light of this doctrine lay apostles will see their true place in the Church of Christ. They will understand their membership in Christ, that they are joined to Christ. They will understand that our Church is truly a living, vibrant organism that quickens, enriches, and sustains its members. All will experience that sense of unity, of community in the Church. And each one will feel when he acts that he is supported by the countless others who have the same problems and who undertake the same things, and that all are supported by Christ.

And it is the light of the truth of the Mystical Body of Christ that lay apostles will develop a most necessary and fundamental outlook. This is appreciation of the sacredness of life in the world. They will see that it is a holy work to seek for justice in society. The layman in politics will see the holiness of his efforts to bring honesty and integrity into such affairs. The housing problem is no longer a remote, impersonal thing; it is finding homes for other Christs. Parents will see the sacredness of their vocation as parents. In the light of this truth, all lay apostles will see that all things be-



long to Christ, and that they may live holy lives in the world by bringing the world to Christ.

Pope Pius XII, out beloved Holy Father, has directed Catholic actionists to act with obedience, as well as with vigor and unity. The foundation of obedience to the Church is that oneness of mind with the Church. All lay apostles must have a Catholic mentality. They must think with the Church, live the life of the Church, and act according to the mind of the Church. One sees all too often, people, often conspicuous for zeal and anxious for improvement, going off on tangents. They quote questionable authorities; their stand on moral questions is usually the "less probable" one; they are sometimes bitterly critical of even the highest authority. They expend their energies on misguided activity and at most make a dubious contribution to the Church. A prime source of information and inspiration on all pertinent religious and social questions is found in the teachings of the Popes. Through these the lay apostle acquires a Catholic mentality. The lay apostle must study, devour, and digest the various encyclicals messages, and letters of the Holy Fathers. These writings constitute a *must* in the formation of the lay apostle.

Each lay apostle is to apply these teachings in his own community, in a particular diocese. And here he receives further direction. Now in a diocese, the responsibility for the welfare of souls belongs primarily to the Bishop. The priest is called to assist the bishop. It is the same with the lay apostle. The laity are called by the bishop to assist him in his apostolic endeavours. It is in obedience to him that they will find their proper activity and role. This means that they will act along those lines and in those fields approved by the Bishop. It means likewise that all will hasten to action, to the fulfilment of his bidding to bring Christ into every aspect of life.

The vocation of the lay apostolate is a marvellous one. It will be fulfilled by all those who seek to live the spiritual life proper to it. It constitutes a challenge to the laity of the twentieth century. May historians of the future write how the laity of this century accepted the challenge, restored the world to Christ, and brought eternal blessings upon the family of man.

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