

THE THEOLOGY OF CATHOLIC ACTION

It is more than somewhat presumptuous to attempt to cover the Theology of Catholic Action in a few moments. Actually the best we can do is to outline the problems involved, and to give what seems to us to be the headlines of the theological solution.

It might be well to emphasize right from the beginning, the tremendous importance of this theological background of Catholic Action for the priests in the movement. If our main function is to inspire and to train the laity it is to theology that we must go to find our inspirational principles and the ideals of the apostolate for which we are training the laity. We spend untold hours telling the laity what they can do, We might accomplish more in shorter order by telling them what they are. If the laity understood their providential place and function in the divine life of the Church which theology explores, it would probably be much more obvious to them what they should do by Catholic Action.

In any case, the philosophers have been telling us for centuries that action follows life. The theology of lay action in the Church will then be a study not so much of the action of the layman, as of his life in the Church: that divine life which comes to him from God through Christ, the life of Christ which Catholic Action invites him to give in his measure to the dying world of today, to revitalize and draw all things to Christ.

Pius XI put this basic truth very clearly when he said:  
"Catholic Action is inseparable from Catholic life, for there can

be no life without action, and action is the most natural and spontaneous expression of life."(1) "Catholic Action,"he continues, "is the Christian life lived with zeal." (2)

At the risk of oversimplification, I should like to summarize the life and function of the layman in the Church under two basic concepts: 1)that the life of the layman in the Church comes from Christ with a special consecration to the work which stems from the life of Christ on earth: the work of apostolate; and 2)that in the lay apostolate, the layman is, in his own way, partaking in the very apostolate of Christ Himself, building up the body of Christ on earth.

To break it down into even simpler terms, Christ has given us His own redemptive work as an objective, basic pattern for the lay apostolate, as for all apostolates, and He has, moreover, given to the layman a specific subjective preparation for his participation in this apostolate of Christ. Here again we have action and life, the action and the life of Christ as our central theological reality, and the layman's high dignity as partaking in this life and action of Christ in the Church. Now to discuss these basic concepts in more detail.

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We must begin with Christ, for our theology of Catholic Action is specifically Christocentric. We must understand the vital importance of the Incarnation and Redemption to the everyday world, if we are to understand the vitality of the Christian layman in the world today. For the layman, as well as the priest, partakes of the divine life brought to earth by the Incarnation, and hence the lay-

man too must partake of the divine work of Redemption, the Calvary and the Easter and the Pent<sup>e</sup>cost which followed the Christmas of the Incarnation. "The Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us... full of grace and truth...and it is of this fullness that we have all received." (3) As Pius XI says when speaking to the laity, "Each receives, each ought in his turn, to give." (4)

To understand what the layman is giving, what divine action he is participating in, we must go back beyond the Incarnation, to the bosom of the Most Holy Trinity, whence the Son, eternally proceeding from the Father, proceeded in time to bring this divine life of God into the world, to initiate the first apostolate by reuniting God and sinful humanity in His own Person. This is the basic mystery of Christianity that St. Paul announced to his dying breath: the key to the life and work and fecundity of the Church in which the layman participate<sup>s</sup> through Catholic Action. As St. Paul puts it: "He (Christ) is the Head of His Body, the Church, He who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may hold the first place. For it has pleased God<sup>the Father</sup> that in Him (Christ) all His fulness should dwell, and that through Him (Christ) He should reconcile all things to Himself." (5)

In the Third Part of the Summa, St. Thomas teaches us that Christ in His very constitution as God-man, was consecrated the Unique and Perfect High Priest of all time. Proceeding from that basic theological fact, the Angelic Doctor sums up the work of Christ's redemptive priesthood as one of mediation: "To unite men perfectly to God belongs to Christ, through Whom men are reconciled to God... 'for God was truly in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself.' " (6) And so Christ alone is the perfect mediator of God

and men, insofar as He reconciled the human race to God by His death."(6)

You have heard a great deal in the introductory conferences about the basic problem of the world today: a redemptive problem of mediation, a priestly problem of reuniting the things of God and the things of man, the spiritual and the temporal, time and eternity. We must never forget that this problem has already been solved by Christ. Objectively, the work has already been done. Our problem is to apply this work of redemption, to participate in Christ's work today, or more simply in the pontifical motto of Pius X: instaurare omnia in Christo. "To restore all things to Christ," he says, "has always been the motto of the Church, and it is ours particularly, in these perilous times through which we are passing."(7) Anticipating Pius XI by some twenty years, he adds: "This ensemble of works--to restore all things in Christ, all things in the family, the school, in society,--this ensemble of works of which the Catholic laity are the principal support and promoters is ordinarily designated by a special and very noble title: Catholic Action."(8)

Christ then must always be at the very center of our theological structure for Catholic Action. His life and His work must be our pattern. As priests, it is His priesthood that we are participating in, It is His priestly work of apostolate that we are prolonging today. But it is not exclusively ours. Christ has given the clergy a special place in the apostolate, but not a monopoly. From the Holy Father down to the humblest layman, there is a place for each in Christ's work and in Christ's kingdom. While we must

apply analogy to this participation in Christ's work on the different levels of the Church's ranks, we must never forget that Christ is at the center for all, and all receive what they have from Him. It is His life, His work, His priesthood and His apostolate.

This is why the Holy Father could say in all truth: "The field of ~~the~~ Catholic Action is as vast as that of the hierarchical apostolate. Just as the hierarchical apostolate was confided to the Church, to the Bishops and to Priests for the expansion of the Reign of Christ, for the salvation of souls, for the glory of God and for the honor of Holy Church, so also, in all of these domains, a field of action is open to all the laity, who, fully conscious of their duties to God and the Church, wish to consecrate their activity to the service of the Lord and their brethren, at the side of the Bishops and Priests, under the direction and discipline of the hierarchy, that is to say, those who in our day continue the work of the Apostles."(9)

This is the objective background of the work of Catholic Action, the high dignity of the layman who really lives and works with the Church. Once more, we have the inspired work of Pius XI to summarize and conclude our first basic concept:

"What does Catholic Action wish to be? To take full account of it we must relate it to the full objective meaning of the word Catholicism. Catholicism means the plenitude and perfection of Christianity with Jesus who has wished it, and with the Church, who aided by Jesus Christ, works to propagate it. This is why Catholic

Action signifies action in the perfection and plenitude of Christianity, according to the will of Jesus Christ, translated into the legislation of the Church. Hence you can understand how your mission is to execute all according to the mind, desires, and precepts of Jesus Christ. In all we do, let us make Jesus Christ the term of every action, of every manifestation of life and thought and desire.....And do not fear, the Redeemer is with us. We are all in his wonderful hierarchy. Jesus Christ is with us and we are but instruments in His Hands....It is a great comfort, a great grace to collaborate, when our collaborator is Jesus Christ Himself."(10)

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Once this objective pattern of Catholic Action has been established, the second basic question is: How are the laity prepared to participate in the priestly redemptive work of Christ? Some talk as though the Bishop merely tells them to do something, and there you have the whole thing: Catholic Action. I do not mean to underestimate the mandate of the Bishop. It is absolutely necessary because Catholic Action is an official external action in a hierarchical society and, therefore, must have the sanction of those who govern this society.

But there is a deeper, ontological reality which enables the laity to partake in the apostolate of Christ, a consecration and commission which comes directly from Christ Himself. This reality, called the sacramental character, constitutes the inner subjective preparation of the layman for a participation in the priestly redemptive work of Christ.

Again, St. Thomas gives us our lead. The objective work

~~work~~ of apostolate is a work achieved once for all by the one Unique and Universal Priest, Christ Jesus. Those who would partake in His priestly mediation must first be configured to his priestly likeness and empowered to do His priestly work. According to St. Thomas, these are precisely the effects of the sacramental characters:

As configuration to the priesthood of Christ: "All the faithful are deputed to receive or to give to others those things which pertain to the service of God; and it is for this that the sacramental character is properly deputed. For the whole rite of the Christian religion derives from the Priesthood of Christ. And so it is evident, that the sacramental character is especially the character of Christ to whose priesthood the faithful are configured by the sacramental characters, which are nothing else than certain participations in the priesthood of Christ derived from Christ Himself."(11)

As to the priestly power conferred by the characters he is no less explicit: "The sacramental character is a certain participation in the priesthood of Christ in His faithful, that as Christ has the full power of spiritual priesthood, so His faithful are configured to Him in this, that they participate in some spiritual power with respect to the sacraments and those things which pertain to divine service. And for this reason, Christ does not have the character, but the power of His priesthood is compared to the character, just as that which is full and perfect (is compared) to that which to some extent participates in it."(12)

The characters then, are the point of contact between the objective redemptive work of Christ, and the prolongation of that work in the world by Christ's members on earth.

St. Thomas further teaches that "the character is in the soul as a certain instrumental power." Thus we can conclude, in general, that the exercise of all participated priestly work will have to conform to the pattern of the principal cause, Christ, the High Priest of all Redemption. The Angelic Doctor further specifies Christ's pattern of priestly mediation: "Insofar as Christ is man it belongs to Him to join men to God by proffering the precepts and gifts of God to men and by sacrificing and interceding for men to God." (14) Here is a beautiful pattern for lay spirituality, collaboration with Christ in work and prayer. Here, too, in brief is the work of the Church today for which the laity are prepared by the sacramental characters of baptism and confirmation. It is essentially a work of participation in the <sup>two</sup> great priestly actions of Christ's Mystical Body, the Ora and the Labora, the ~~apostolate~~ public prayer and universal apostolate. Here are the cornerstones of the Liturgical Movement and Catholic Action.

To delve further into the theology of Catholic Action necessitates a few words on the specific characters of Baptism and Confirmation for these are the structural sacraments that give a layman his permanent status in the life and work of the Church.

Baptism gives the primary consecration, for by the character of Baptism the layman is configured to the likeness of Christ the Priest and given the passive power of receiving the fruits of Christ's priestly mediation through the reception of the other sacraments. Hence Baptism is the basic preparation <sup>for</sup> the liturgical movement, which is of tremendous importance in building up in the layman the



spirit of Christ which must be diffused through Catholic Action. Baptism has another very basic relationship to Catholic Action which has been cogently expressed by the Holy Father.

"Although it is less<sup>the</sup>evident to/untheological-minded, Baptism also imposes the duty of the apostolate, because it is by Baptism that we become members of the Church, that is the Body of Christ. Among the members of the Body--and it is the same for any organism--there must be a reciprocal communication of life: 'We being many, are one Body in Christ and every one members one of another.' One member should help the other. None can remain inactive. Each receives; each ought in his turn to give. Now each Christian receives the supernatural life which circulates in the Body of Christ, this abundant life which Christ, as he said, came to bring upon the earth. And consequently, every Christian ought to pour out this life upon others who do not possess it, or who possess it only in appearance."(15)

By the Baptismal Character the layman is permanently incorporated into the Body of Christ, begins to live with the life of Christ. Now since action follows life, the official apostolic action of the Mystical Body will follow all the formalities of life in the Mystical Body -- it will be essentially religious, social, corporate activity. It will be hierarchically organized and specialized according to one's position in the Body. All its inner dynamism will be ultimately directed towards the good of the whole Body -- that Christ may be all in all, that all may grow up in Christ. These, then, are the notes and characteristics of Catholic Action, for they are primarily and fundamentally the lineaments of Catholic life in the Mystical Body.

But Baptism is only the beginning of the Christian life, as St. Thomas says: "In Baptism the Christian is made capable of what pertains to his personal salvation, insofar as he lives for himself alone. Whereas in Confirmation, the Christian attains maturity and receives the power of extending his activity to others, while before he lived for himself alone."(16) Thus Confirmation perfects what Baptism begins. Once more from St. Thomas, "Baptism regenerates a man in the spiritual life which is his individual life...but confirmation looks beyond personal sanctity to the external combat to which man is exposed."(17) Confirmation therefore brings to the layman a fuller participation in the priesthood of Christ, and gives him the fullness of the Holy Spirit as his spiritual weapons in the apostolate of the Body of which he is now a confirmed and mature member.

In this marvelous way, the layman is inwardly prepared to take his place in the life and work of the Church. Like all living bodies, the Mystical Body of Christ has its immanent and transient action, grows inwardly and outwardly through the great priestly works of prayer and apostolate. What we must emphasize for the laity is that this life and growth of the Mystical Body is a corporate reality in which all of them have a vital part, to which all of them are perpetually committed by their configuration to the Priestly Head of the Body. Thus all baptized and confirmed members of Christ are empowered to continue in every age and in every place the great priestly work ~~in~~ which He initiated -- to bring men to God and God to men.

Our task as priests is to inspire every Christian to collaborate effectively with Christ and the Church in this magnificent work of Redemption. What better way of doing this than by telling the layman what he is in Christ. If we can get the laity to appreciate their god-given place in the life of the Church, I do not think we shall have too much trouble getting them to consecrate themselves heart and soul to the work of the Church, to the restoration of all things in Christ.

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NOTES

1. "Address to the Pilgrimage of 'France du Travail,' May 20, 1929  
Documentation Catholique, p.144.
2. "Address to the Pontifical Work of the Missions at Rome," April  
29, 1938, E. Guerry, L'Action Catholique, p.13, n.20 bis.
3. John, I, 14-16.
4. "Ex Officios litteris," (to Card. Carejara) November 10, 1933.  
A.A.S., Series II, Vol 1:629
5. Colossians, I, 18-20
6. St. Thomas, Sum. Theol. P.III, q.26, a.1, c.
7. "Address to the Young Catholic Women of Belgium," August 26, 1936  
Doc. Cath., op.cit., p.456
8. Ibid.
9. "Address to the Bishops and Pilgrims of Jugoslavia," May 5, 1929,  
Doc.Cath., op.cit., p.139
10. "Address to the Committee of Italian Catholic Action," April 9, 1924,  
Doc. Cath., op.cit., pp.89-90.
11. St. Thomas, Sum. Theol., P. III, q.63 a. 3, c.
12. Ibid., q.63, a.5, c.
13. Ibid., q. 63, a.5, ad 1.
14. Ibid., q.26, a.2, c., ad finem.
15. Supra, note #4.
16. St. Thomas, Sum. Theol., P.III, q.72, a.2, c
17. Ibid., q. 72, a.4, ad 3.