

## THE LAYMAN AND SOCIETY

*Reflections on three Congresses*

IT is exactly thirty years ago that the first of the now famous *Semaines Sociales de France* was held in Lyons. Since then sessions—annual, except during the War—have been held of this perambulating Catholic University in all the regions of France: the twenty-sixth session was held this year in Nice (July 23 to 29). In 1932, at Lille, the theme treated was economic; last year, at Rheims, political; this year the official title of the subject was *Social Order and Education*. The title puzzled not a few, myself included: and it is only now that in retrospect I seem to grasp its full meaning. At Lille and Rheims the principles of economic and political science, as embodied in Catholic doctrine, had been admirably stated—principles, which have only to be applied, to end the economic and political anarchy of our age. But the anarchy continues; the principles are not applied. Why? Because our age does not know them; because an *education* is needed. It is only through education that we can move towards an ordered Society: *Par l'éducation vers l'ordre social chrétien* was in fact the title of the President's inaugural address at Nice.

'Christianity has been tried two thousand years and has failed,' say our neo-pagans. No, we retort, it has never failed, whenever it has been tried: the trouble is, that it has so rarely been tried. Individually, yes, it has been and is being tried: but socially? When non-Christians and anti-Christians twit us about the 'failure' of our faith, it is its social 'failure' that they mean: that religion is an anodyne, is 'opium,' for the individual, they are only too ready to grant. That sneer has produced in Russia the Anti-God Movement: almost necessarily, one might add. For the only Christianity known in Russia was either that of the official State Church, or else of sects of fantastic otherworldliness: neither professed to have anything

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whatever to say regarding economic or political problems. Why should a Catholic pretend that this sort of Christianity did not fail socially?

Catholicism alone does not place this world's affairs, its needs, its problems, its possibilities, as outside its own scope. Catholicism looks καθ' ὅλον, towards the whole; nothing so high or so low, so overwhelmingly important or so trivially little, but finds its appointed place in its system, its hierarchy of values. From God's self-revelation there flows the whole body of Catholic doctrine, which includes man's place in Creation, and his corporal as well as his spiritual, his individual as well as his social, activities: wherever there is a morally right and a morally wrong way of doing things, the Church has the capacity, nay the duty, of guiding man. The Church provides all the lighthouses, all the buoys, necessary for safe navigation: but she does not navigate the individual ships. Man is in the making here below; his making or marring is in his own hands. Christianity is not magic: it does not willy-nilly turn man into a pig or a saint, nor human society into a jungle or into a City of God. The necessary true doctrine is there: it is left to man to apply it or not.

The doctrine has ever been taught by that part of the Church which is eminently the *ecclesia docens*. But has the rest of the Church been always as ready to apply that doctrine to its own family, professional or civic life? And if the reply is very much in the negative, is it not largely due to the fact that education in these vital matters has usually stopped short at the age of intellectual puberty? Religious instruction, said a speaker in Nice, has so long been deemed to be instruction given to children, that it is hardly surprising to find that religion is nowadays widely looked upon as childish. Education, however, is not merely instruction; it is an 'up-bringing'—so ran the first of the concluding resolutions passed in Nice—which 'brings' man above himself, up to God Himself; it is not restricted to childhood or adolescence, but must be pursued to the end of one's life, of course with appropriate

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changes in its character and methods. The core of the problem was reached in Mgr. Bruno de Solages' paper on *The Selection of an Elite*, in which he discussed the method we have adopted from the Chinese—the competitive examination. Selection, as the Rector of the Catholic University of Toulouse observed at the outset, is a biological, not a human term; the stud-farmer selects his animals for breeding purposes; the human being is not selected for a profession, he elects a vocation. And so he pleaded for a snapping of the artificial link between access to culture and access to a liberal profession. What is true culture? To know one's place in the Universe and to give a purpose to one's life, answered Mgr. Solages. And this culture should be accessible to all—not only to an élite, but to the broad masses of humanity. It did not mean taking the peasant from his plough, nor the weaver from his loom: true culture was nearer to sanctity than to genius—for religion, though not the whole of culture, was at the heart of all true culture.

The bane of education hitherto has been, not only that it was restricted to one of man's ages, to childhood and adolescence, instead of to man's whole life, but also to one class of human society, instead of to the whole of society. Consequently, said M. Bayart, of the Catholic University of Lille, the whole end of education has been frustrated: the spiritual is no longer being temporalized, and the temporal no longer spiritualized. A small office suffices for an architect to build the house, scores of workmen and contractors, a whole builder's yard, is needed. That builder's yard is the temporal: it is there that the whole body of the faithful must work to build the City of God. Or rather, one should say that all men, that are in the world, are actually working there: and the problem is just this, how the Christian minority, even if fully alive to its task, can succeed in building the Heavenly Jerusalem, when the majority of the builders merely pull down what they attempt to construct or else build something quite different, following

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the designs, not of God, but of Mammon or any other such false god.

The first need obviously is that the faithful possess that general culture demanded by Mgr. de Solages, and be filled with the spirit of an intense love of God, and of their fellow-men on account of God. But it is not sufficient that the leaven be first-rate: it must be mixed with the dough if it is to be effective. Hence the Resolution which stressed the need of the lay-apostolate, 'amounting to a veritable spiritual mobilization': the co-operation in the Church's apostolic ministry of the laity who are required to leaven their *milieu* and thereby gradually to transmute the realm of the contingent and probable into the glorious certainty of a Communion of Saints and of the Mystical Body of Christ.

This co-ordination of action and thought, of individual and society, lies at the bottom of what under the inspiration of our Holy Father is now known as Catholic Action. It is being increasingly realized that the very future of the Church depends on this 'spiritual mobilization' of the laity; and with that realization comes a deepening, which recognizes that the layman's part is not merely to be an assistant of the priest in the religious and ecclesiastical sphere. That is needed; and in that ministry the layman shares in the apostolate of the hierarchy. But just for this reason, he cannot go beyond the strictly spiritual, beyond works of mercy, beyond 'Catholic Action' in the strict and limited meaning of the word: for as he shares in the official apostolate of the Church, he is necessarily and completely subject to the particular as well as to the general direction of the hierarchy. But that rôle by no means exhausts the possibilities of lay action. In the realm of the contingent, the temporal, the concrete, the Church cannot assume a particular direction; she cannot make herself responsible for the manner in which the individual Catholic applies the general directions binding upon all the faithful. Inversely, in such activities the layman cannot compromise the Church, but only him-

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self: the liberty of man's free-will is scrupulously respected; while on the other hand, the Church's liberty is safeguarded, inasmuch as she refuses to be identified with the theories and practices of individuals. Everywhere 'Catholic Action' is being meticulously distinguished from 'Political Action' and 'Social Action.'

But this distinction should be an encouragement, rather than a discouragement, for the Catholic layman to plunge into this 'Social Action'—on his own initiative, his own responsibility and for his own fulfilment. In his family, his profession and his country every man, *qua* man, has a part to play: being a Catholic, he must infuse a Catholic meaning and attitude to it; being a leaven, he must permeate his family, his profession and his country, as far as he can, with that ferment, which will tend to polarize, so to say, the whole mass God-ward and order it in Justice and Charity.

These ideas may seem in the air: in France they have taken bodily form, as in the *Ad Lucem* Movement of Lille, which held a Conference at Nice during the days preceding the *Semaine Sociale*. Let me explain that the *Ad Lucem* Movement takes special interest in over-sea countries: it is inter-racial, and at its basis lies the idea that no single race and no civilization are complete in themselves, but need others in order to complement themselves. It is a movement of young intellectuals, who feel the urge to leave their home and country, to merge themselves as laymen in Asiatic or African societies, to be Greek with the Greeks and barbarian with the barbarians, if haply they may thus become a Catholic leaven, destined to transmute—and thus save—pagan societies and cultures, ere these fall a prey to the disruptive forces of irreligion and materialism, with which our neo-pagan Western world is assailing them.

Need one insist on the difficulties of such a vocation? To be a good Catholic in one's family, one's professional and one's public life is already difficult enough: yet it is the minimum required of us all, by fulfilling which we can

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all contribute our own mite towards the building of the City of God. But there exists nowadays certainly also another and equally true vocation of laymen, who feel called to do more than this minimum; to consecrate themselves entirely, that is, to this very special kind of lay-apostolate by social action in the spirit of the three counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience. The great difficulty (and novelty!) of this call is that it is not at all a call to the 'religious life,' in the technical sense of that word. The layman in question ardently desires to remain a layman: indeed his whole apostolate depends on the fact that he is a layman, plainly and fully, and not a monk nor member of a religious congregation or even pious association. That is fundamental: their spirit is not that of the lady who has not been able to enter a Carmel and who now accepts the world regretfully as a second-best. They are laymen, fully and joyously, because they know it is their true vocation: it is in the world that they feel called to conquer the world for Christ. But their sense of that vocation is so strong and so urgent, that they also feel they must give to it their whole being—that, being about the King's business, they have no right to found a family of their own or attend to their personal advancement.

Neither 'Religious' nor 'Catholic Actionists' in the accepted meaning—between 'Two Towers,' as Ida Coudenhove called it in her book *Von den Zwei Türmen*—how is this *Laïcate*,<sup>1</sup> as it comes to be called, going to organize itself? The problem brought together a good number of persons interested in it at a Conference, held near St. Gallen in Switzerland from August 25th to 27th. A society of women social workers of Lyons; *Ad Lucem* of Lille; the Union of SS. Peter and Paul of Paris; the *Foyer St. Justin* of Fribourg (Switzerland); the *Compagnons de St. François* of France; the *Christ-Königs Gesellschaft* of Bavaria; the *Samariter Schwestern* of Baden; the *Marienschwestern* of

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<sup>1</sup> A portmanteau word derived from lay-apostolate? The French say *Laïcut*, the Germans *Laïkatus*.

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the Rhineland—were among those officially represented at the Conference. The friendly discussions revealed both the unity of purpose underlying all these movements, and the sharp differences distinguishing them along national characteristics: the gregarious habits of the German mind with its love of discipline on the one hand; *l'esprit frondeur* of French mentality with its horror of regimentation on the other. Besides, there was on all sides a groping about, as still in the dark: if one thing is clear, it is that we are still at the very beginning of things in these movements for a *Laïcate*. Yet is it not significant that spontaneously in so many countries, such a movement should have sprung up—each one quite independent of the others? St. Benedict's cenobitic monasticism was a great innovation in his own day; no less that of the Friars, who in their age abandoned the monastic enclosure; and of the Jesuits, who in addition relinquished even the choir-office. If to-day the Church—and the world—need the 'Laïcate,' who is there to say nay to it on the score of its novelty?

A layman was defined at St. Gallen as a person who normally works in the temporal realm: hence the *Laïcate* was distinguished as 'temporal action' from 'Catholic Action.' What distinguishes it from a religious congregation is the absence of any obligatory promises, let alone vows. How then can there be any organized association of such lay-people? *Ad Lucem* perhaps leads the way in this: its wholly consecrated members make a solemn declaration in writing, that they purpose to live as if they were under the three vows—a purpose which they daily renew at their Holy Communion, but which of course in no way binds them under sin. The Ladies of Lyons (their society is nameless) have lived their common life on these lines these fifteen years already: many go out into institutions and activities of their own, but their Community-House remains their permanent home, where they will find that moral comfort and material backing, which their families would normally provide for the average layman (or woman), who has no call to this *Laïcate*.

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The Germans seem to have seen no way out but to imitate more or less the life of a 'Congregation': though Fr. Kaiser refuses to his *Samariter Schwestern* a chapel of their own or any other spiritual advantage which would set them apart from the peasants and workers amongst whom they live. To help the layfolk, says he, they must have no special privileges denied to other lay-people: and so they trudge every morning a couple of miles to their daily Mass in the Parish Church. Perhaps the weakest spot still in all these noble essays is the somewhat ambiguous position of the priest in them. What has the priest to do in such a lay affair? He certainly must not be in charge of it, if it is to be a real laymen's affair: he certainly must not be shut out from it, if the laity is really Catholic. The original impetus certainly has always come from the laity concerned: but the priest has naturally had their spiritual direction. The general idea is clear and obvious enough: it is its application which seems still capable of improvement. The crucial point seems to me the fact, that when, for instance, the Society of Jesus was founded, it was Jesuits who founded it and that when other members were subsequently added, it was Jesuits who trained them to become Jesuits. In the same way, the *Laicate*, it seems to me, needs as a *terminus a quo* laymen banding themselves together in a society, subsequent members of which will be trained to and by the common life they will lead with the original, senior, members. To leave that training—not *qua* Catholics, but *qua* laymen—to priests seems as incongruous as if the training of future Dominicans were entrusted to Benedictines or Jesuits. As I see it, some lay-people, exercising their sundry avocations in the world, but realizing their special call, would come together in a common life of the Counsels; among them there should be a priest, who however should not be their 'chaplain,' but a secular priest earning his living elsewhere: the whole forming a 'chummery,' a common enough feature of life in the Colonies. What however would be uncommon about these cells of the *Laicate*, would be their supernatural purpose and life. If God wills



it, the necessary founder-members will surely be found—and find each other.

A great chimaera, all this? At times one feels tempted to say so and give up the struggle against the difficulties which arise on every side. And yet . . . .

Perhaps the most solid ground for belief in this *Laïcate* is its ascetic side: the fact that it may be called upon to elaborate a new type of sanctity, such as would be racy of the modern soil from which it would spring. Starting with the natural virtues and the duties of one's station in life, it would not flee the world, but would want to connect it with, and offer it up to, God—not only one's sufferings, but also 'the music that charms, the perfume that delights, the dishes that please,' as St. John of the Cross says in his *Ascent of Mt. Carmel* (Ch. 23). The layman alone is capable to import the practice of silence and recollection into this fevered world; to show how one may have comfort without luxury and pleasures without amusements; how one's profession may be the proper instrument of one's sanctification; and how the commonweal of City, State and Humanity subserves the glory of God in a City of God to be.

Social Action! Man, after all, is a social being; he is not a discarnate spirit either: therefore the goal that beckons to us is not the individual ecstasy of *solus cum Solo*, but a New Heaven and a New Earth, a New Jerusalem, a Holy City having the glory of God and, therefore also, the true honour and glory of all the nations in it. We, who have heard the call of the *Laïcate*, have heard the words of promise: 'Blessed are they that may enter in by the gates into the City' (Apos. 22. 14) and with St. John we respond: 'Amen, Come, Lord Jesus.'

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