

THE LAY APOSTOLATE

POPE PIUS XII

Words addressed to the World Congress of Lay Apostles, at Rome, 14th October, 1951.

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VENERABLE Fathers, dearest sons and daughters, it is a source of great consolation and joy to Us to see before Us this impressive gathering of representatives from every continent and from every part of the world, met together here at the very centre of Christianity to celebrate this world Congress on the Lay Apostolate. You have been studying the nature and purpose of this work, you have given much thought to the present state of the world and you are acutely aware of the grave responsibilities which are upon us of this generation to look to the future. These have been for you days of ceaseless prayer, a time for a searching examination of conscience and, withal, an opportunity to exchange views and experiences. And now at the close of the Congress you have come to renew your confession of faith, to declare once more your devotedness and fidelity to the Vicar of Christ, and to ask his blessing on your work and resolutions.

During Our Pontificate We have often spoken about the Lay Apostolate, from different points of view according to the circumstances of the occasion: We have spoken of it before Catholic Action groups and at Marian Conferences; We have spoken of it to working men and women, to teachers, doctors and lawyers, and to special audiences of women; and We have never failed to emphasise the real duties of each in public life as well as in private. These were so many opportunities for Us to mention, sometimes only in passing but at other times quite explicitly, the problems which have been receiving your special attention during this past week.

But on an occasion such as this, when We are speaking to a select company of priests and laymen, each one of whom is fully conscious of his responsibility in this matter of the apostolate. We should like, very briefly, in the light of the past history of the Church, to outline the place of the apostolate and say something about its role in the world today. At no time in the history of the Church has the apostolate been absent; and it should be both interesting and instructive to follow its growth down through the years.

An opinion which finds favour in some quarters is that during the last four hundred years the Church has been exclusively 'clerical', by way of reaction to the upheavals of the sixteenth

century which claimed to abolish the hierarchy once and for all; and so it is suggested that the time is now ripe for the Church to enlarge her forces.

Now this view is the very antithesis of the truth, for it is precisely since the time of the Council of Trent that the lay element in the apostolate has come to the fore and made steady progress. There is no lack of proof that this is so, but it will be sufficient to recall two facts from among the many incidents of history: one is the work of the Marian Congregations of laymen in the furtherance of the apostolate in every domain of public life; the other is the increasing part played by women in this same apostolate in recent times. In this connection two outstanding figures in Catholic history spring to mind: Mary Ward, that wonderful woman whom Catholic England gave as succour to the Church in her dark and terrible hours of anguish; and St Vincent de Paul, beyond all doubt the foremost among those who have given themselves to organising and fostering works of Catholic charity.

But We must not neglect to mention and to praise the real power for good which existed in Catholic countries up to the time of the French Revolution: We are referring to the close union between the Church and the State, the two authorities divinely appointed to govern us. The helpful and ready co-operation in those affairs of public life in which each party had an interest generally made for such a spirit of christian goodwill as to render unnecessary, for the most part, the difficult and tactful vigilance which priests and laymen must exercise today if they are to safeguard the faith and ensure its practice.

At the end of the eighteenth century fresh forces entered into play. History saw the emergence of the United States of America—a country which has developed in an amazing way and where, soon, the Church should expand and grow in vigour of life; but that same period saw the outburst of the French Revolution the consequences of which reached out and were felt beyond the confines of Europe. Its outcome was the split between Church and State. It is true that the effects of the Revolution were not at once apparent everywhere, nor ultimately felt in the same way; but inevitably the rift between Church and State left the Church to fend for herself: to further her work, to fulfil her mission, to safeguard her special rights and liberty of action, was henceforth to be her own responsibility. The need brought forth the appropriate response in the form of a number of Catholic movements under the leadership of priests and laymen. United in aim and in loyalty—and herein lay their strength and influence for good—these movements gathered in the mass of the faithful to meet the challenge and in the end to overcome the threat. Here surely is the beginning of the apostolate of the laity.

On this solemn occasion it is Our duty, and one that gives Us

great happiness, to remind you of all those people, priests and laymen, men and women, who have taken their part in such movements for God and the Church; their names deserve to be held in honour by all men. In the beginning they wore themselves out in the struggle, but all the time using their forces to greater advantage as the isolated units were gradually united and unified. These were scarcely days opportune for a Congress such as you have just had. Indeed, it is only within the last fifty years that the apostolate of the laity has grown to the fullness of its perfection. The reason for this is obvious enough. Under the influence of a quickening tempo in the ebb and flow of history, those forces which hitherto for so many years have divided man into opposing camps, for or against God, the Church and religion, have gained considerably in momentum, so that the evil of disruption is now to be found eating into the heart of nations, nay, within the very hearth itself.

It is true that there is a large mass of people, drifting, wavering, pulled now one way now another by the opposing forces of good and evil, like so much flotsam caught in the slip-water at the meeting of contrary tides. Religion for them is not yet moribund, but it has little or no meaning and plays no part in the shaping and directing of their lives. Yet we know from experience that they cannot go on avoiding the issue indefinitely. Sooner or later they will be forced to make a decision and declare themselves. In her universal mission the Church has a threefold task: to stir up the faithful to a realisation of the crying needs of our times; to invite into the warmth, friendship and security of the fold those who are hesitating at its threshold; to recall the lost sheep whom she can never abandon to their sad fate. What could be more glorious than this? And yet how difficult it is to achieve because of the fact that the numbers of her priests do not increase in proportion to the ever growing needs of the Church. Moreover, before all else the priest must perform the work which is peculiarly his, since that is an office which no one else can undertake. For this reason the support of the faithful in the work of the apostolate is an absolute necessity. Just how important and valuable is this help can be seen in times of war when one can appreciate the sense of comradeship among one's fellow soldiers or prisoners of war. Where there is something in common, whether it be in one's daily work, or at home, or in some misfortune shared by others, that common element can be a powerful instrument for good; and this is especially true in matters of religion. Sheer force of circumstances, then, as we have seen in the few examples quoted, and there are many more besides, has brought it about that the laity should take an ever increasing share in the apostolic work of the Church.

There is no need for Us to state in detail what is involved in being a lay apostle. We have spoken at length on this subject on

other occasions; and the number of suggestions made and the variety of experiences exchanged during your Congress make repetition on that score unnecessary. We shall do no more, therefore, than offer a few suggestions which may throw more light on one or other of the outstanding problems.

1. All the faithful without exception are members of the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ. And so all are obliged, not only by the natural law but also more explicitly by divine positive law, to give a good example of a truly christian life. 'We are the good odour of Christ unto God in them that are saved and in them that perish' (2 Cor. 2, 15). At his prayers and at Mass each one must pray not only for his intentions but also, and with what fruit in these days, for the spread of the kingdom of God on earth; and each must pray in the spirit of the Our Father, the prayer which Christ himself gave to us as our model.

We cannot, however, say that all are called in an equal measure to the apostolate, if we understand that word in its strictest sense. For God has not given to all the opportunity and the necessary ability for such an undertaking. The mother of a family, for example, is busy bringing up her children to a truly christian way of life, and often, if the children are to be properly nourished, she has to work in the home to eke out the meagre earnings of her husband. For such as these, active work in the apostolate is clearly out of the question. Yet it is no easy matter to draw the line of demarcation and limit the apostolate in so precise a way as to be able to say who among the laity are apostles and who are not. Are we to include education among the works of the apostolate, whether it be given at home by the mother or at school by zealous teachers? What of the Catholic doctor who steadfastly refuses to act contrary to the natural and divine laws in following his profession, who proclaims and defends the dignity of married life and safeguards the rights of the children; is he an apostle? Or again, there is the Catholic statesman who devotes himself to the cause of the less fortunate members of society.

There are many who would question the right of these educators, doctors and statesmen to the title of apostle, seeing in their work, which they concede to be admirable, no more than their common duty.

But we know what a unique and powerful weapon in the struggle for souls is the humble performance of one's duty by countless millions of conscientious and exemplary christians.

The Lay Apostolate, in the strict sense, is undoubtedly part and parcel of Catholic Action and takes the form of different societies and groups approved by the Church for specific apostolic work. But it is at the same time wider in extent than that; it claims as apostles all those men and women who, in an effort to bring men to the truth and to the life of grace, seize upon every opportunity to do good by whatever means present them-

selves. And We cannot forget the many excellent laymen who are living in countries where the Church is persecuted as she was in the first centuries of the christian era. Risking life itself, they fill, as best they can, the place of the priests who have been carried off to prison; they instruct men in the faith, teaching them how to live and think aright, encourage them to come to the Sacraments and awaken in them the spirit of devotion and reverence, especially for the Blessed Sacrament. We would ask you to see these people as so many labourers working in the vineyard of Christ. Do not be narrow-minded, nor trouble to inquire what organisation or society they belong to; rather be ready to acknowledge and admire the good that they are doing.

We are not decrying, be it carefully noted, or underestimating the value of groups specially organised for particular tasks in the apostolate; on the contrary We hold such group movements in the highest esteem, more especially in a world where the enemies of the Church are themselves organised in their opposition. But what We are stressing is that the need for organisation must never be allowed to drain the apostolate of its life-blood and make of it an effete and esoteric cult; for then we should be counted among those whom the Apostle speaks of as coming in 'to spy out our liberty' (Gal. 2, 4). Even within your organised groups each individual should be given scope to exercise to the full his various talents and gifts in whatever serves 'unto good, to edification' (Rom. 15, 2). Let it, then, be a matter for rejoicing when you find others not of your rank, 'led by the spirit of God' (Gal. 5, 18), winning souls for Christ.

2. *The roles of the clergy and the laity in the apostolate.* It is obvious that the lay apostolate cannot be exercised independently of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, since by divine institution the work of the apostolate belongs to the clergy by right of office. To deny this essential subordination would be to undermine the very foundation upon which Christ built his Church. But it would still be false to imagine that within the diocese at least, the Church regards the apostolate of the laity and that of the clergy as essentially equal, so that not even the Bishop would have the power to submit parochial activities to the jurisdiction of the parish priest. The Bishop certainly has this power and he can decree that no apostolic work should be performed by the laity within the parish without the permission of the priest in charge. The parish priest is the shepherd appointed by the Bishop to watch over the flock within the parish and so he is responsible for the care of those under his jurisdiction.

It is no less true, and for the same reason, that the parish priest has jurisdiction over his subjects even when they are engaged in works of an apostolic nature which are not strictly parochial or diocesan; the common good of the Church requires this.

In Our address to the Italian Catholic Action Movement (3 May, 1951), We made it clear that the subordination of the lay apostolate to the clergy admits of varying degrees. The closest possible co-operation must exist between the clergy and Catholic Action organisations; for Catholic Action is an instrument in the hands of the hierarchy, as it were a member of the ecclesiastical body and so necessarily responsive and obedient to the will of that body. The other apostolic activities of the faithful, whether organised or not, are best left as free from control as possible, though the amount of freedom will vary according to purpose of the work. We need hardly say that whatever initiative is shown by the laity in the furtherance of the apostolate, it should in every case be kept within the bounds of orthodoxy and should never contradict the legitimate decree of the competent ecclesiastical superior.

When We make use of a current expression and liken the lay apostle, or rather We should say the Catholic Actionist, to an instrument in the hands of the hierarchy, what We mean is that clerics are to use Catholic Action in the way that the Creator and Lord of all uses man as his instruments, namely, as secondary, co-operating causes, disposing them 'with great favour' (Sap. 12, 18). The clergy should be fully conscious of their grave responsibility in this matter; they should help to encourage the faithful in the apostolate, gladly listen to their suggestions and plans, and be ready and willing to accept them whenever possible. In the decisive battles of history it is sometimes the initiative and drive of the front line troops that win the day. Examples of this kind in the history of the Church are no less numerous.

It is desirable that relations between priest and people in the work of the apostolate should be, in general, as happy as possible. There should be no question of one vying with the other. The sort of talk We sometimes hear about the 'emancipation of the laity' is highly displeasing to Us. Not only is it distasteful, it is, besides, a distortion of history. The great leaders of the past one hundred and fifty years, the period of history We spoke of earlier in Our address, can hardly be regarded as children under tutelage yearning to be free of an irksome restriction. A truth too often overlooked is this: in the kingdom of grace there are no children, all are adult.

The call for help addressed to the laity is neither the result of any negligence on the part of the clergy, nor of their inability to meet the demands of their office. Individual failures there must inevitably be, human nature being what it is; but they are to be found in every walk of life. In general the priest is not less acute than the layman to discern the signs of the times, nor is he any less attentive to the cries of those in need. The layman is asked to assist the priest in the work of saving souls because the shortage of priests makes it impossible for them to

fulfil their mission satisfactorily without the invaluable help of the laity.

3. Dearest sons and daughters, it will be well to remind ourselves of the very practical work achieved and still carried on through the lay apostolate in every sphere of life both private and public. During these days you have been examining and discussing some of the results of that work. Wherever christian marriage is served, there you will find the lay apostle, helping with the problems of marriage and the family, jealous for the rights of the children in the family and in questions of education and schooling, freely giving of his time for the running of clubs for boys and girls; in the service of his neighbour outside the family circle he is no less active, promoting works of charity as numerous and varied as the needs themselves, organising social services as remedy for the mental and physical sickness of his fellows; the support of the missions naturally claims his attention and he is not unaware of the good to be done in helping those who are going abroad or coming into the country; he is no stranger to university circles, where the intellectual difficulties of the cultured and educated classes have to be met, while his lively interest and his deep knowledge of sports topics and games brings him into contact with yet another section of the community; and lastly, though by no means the least among the works of the apostolate, he is to be found influencing public opinion for good in the many ways in which that is possible.

We commend and praise all your efforts in this direction and we wish especially to praise the spirit of goodwill and the zeal that are yours; that zeal and goodwill have been so obviously manifest during the Congress and it is these same qualities, such is their influence for good, that have made the Congress such a success.

There is a tendency in the world today, alas, even among Catholics, to limit severely the Church's sphere of action to what are called 'purely religious' functions. We know only too well what is meant: let the Church reign supreme in the sanctuary if she will so long as she leaves men free to find out for themselves the answers to their problems and needs. We beg of you to oppose this pernicious attitude.

It is unfortunately the case that in certain countries the Church is obliged to confine her activities to within the four walls of the house of God; but even there she must do whatever she possibly can. She will never willingly or freely relinquish her rights on any score.

The law of Christ must necessarily and in every respect touch the lives of men whether as individuals or as members of society. It is, then, inevitable that in the affairs of Church and State there should be close interplay. Politics, as the root (*polis*) suggests, means the good government of the State. But the well-

being of a country is not something achieved by means of the laws of the State alone; that would be to minimise the richness and extent of the concept of the common good. Laws of a higher kind operate whenever things like marriage, the family, the rights of children, the schools, to take but a few examples, are under discussion; and these laws must be recognised and complied with even within the sphere of the State. These are things intimately bound up with religion and no one who is indifferent to such issues can call himself an apostle. In the Address We mentioned earlier (3 May, 1951) We made it clear that Catholic Action should not allow itself to become entangled in party politics. But what We said to the members of the Olivant Conference (28 March, 1948) is equally true: 'however praiseworthy it may be to hold oneself aloof from the petty quarrels of party politics . . . it would be, nevertheless, a matter for blame if we were to stand aside and leave the government of the country to unworthy or incapable men'. What, then, is the golden mean at which the lay apostle should aim? No hard and fast rule can be laid down for all. Different circumstances and temperaments must obviously be taken into account in arriving at a decision.

We warmly approve your resolutions; they are an expression of your determination to rise above merely national interests in order to establish friendly relationships and a christian understanding with all men. If there is a force in the world today capable of breaking down the miserable barriers of prejudice and party politics which keep men apart, one able to resolve the differences, heal the wounds and re-unite men in a common bond of trust, that force is the Catholic Church. And it is your joy and honour to help the Church in her task.

No more fitting conclusion could be found for your conferences than those words of St Paul, the Apostle of all nations: 'For the rest, brethren, rejoice, be perfect, take exhortation, be of one mind, have peace. And the God of peace and of love shall be with you' (2 Cor. 13, 11). And his last words to the Corinthians, 'The grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ and charity of God and the communication of the Holy Ghost be with you all' (2 Cor., 13, 13), express in one sentence the sum total of what the lay apostle strives to bring to his fellow men. May that same grace be with you all.

God grant Our final prayer on your behalf and bestow upon you and upon all the faithful every blessing and every good gift. In token of Our unbounded love and esteem We extend to you all Our Apostolic blessing.