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SPIRITUALITY OF CATHOLIC ACTION

By Most Rev. Emile Guerry, D.D., Coadjutor-Archbishop of Cambrai

A sound spirituality is not only the first aim and prerequisite of Catholic Action, it must also be so thoroughly Christian as to further the aims of the apostolate.

We are indebted to Bro. Joseph Stefanelli, S.M., Catholic High School, Hamilton, Ohio, for this translation from the French.

Three general principles, it seems to us, should receive special emphasis in a spirituality of Catholic Action. Apostles of Catholic Action must tend toward perfection:

1. in and through their life in the midst of the world;
2. in and through their duties of state;
3. in and through their apostolic life.

FIRST PRINCIPLE: in and through their life in the midst of the world.

What, basically, is a layman?

We might answer: one who is neither a cleric nor a religious. And that answer, though apparently facetious, is nonetheless canonically exact. But it is purely negative. More positively, we can say: a layman is one who must live in the midst of the world.

A spirituality of Catholic Action should therefore draw its inspiration from Our Lord's prayer to His Father: "I do not ask you to take them from the world, but to guard them from evil..., sanctify them in truth." (John, 17:17)

Such a spirituality should form souls which are strong, virile, joyously militant, desirous to gain their environment for Christ, souls able to understand and to love their milieu (as opposed to the spirit of seeking to avoid contact with it), combatting that pessimistic tendency which leads one to shirk human tasks and the obligation of a life in one's milieu, and to withdraw into an ivory tower or isolate oneself on a mountain, meanwhile casting anathemas of contempt upon a wicked world or, like the sons of Zebedee, asking God to cause fire from Heaven to fall upon the accursed city.

Of course, it is clear that such a spirituality demands a solid asceticism, but it places it where it should be

and not in means of perfection which are foreign to the state of life. This spirituality will not conceal the difficulties, the temptations, the obstacles which the soul will find facing it and surrounding it in its attempt to reach perfection. It is indeed important that there be no illusions in this regard and that all things be seen "in truth"; dangers do exist in the midst of the world. There is, moreover, the question of loyalty to souls which are seeking their vocation; it is well understood, too, that we preserve in its fullness the doctrinal tenet of the superiority in itself of a state of life entirely consecrated to God, and not give way at all to the present tendency which minimizes religious life to glorify the lay life. But this spirituality of Catholic Action would teach the laymen who wish to be faithful to their vocation in the world, how to make use of difficulties, how to use temptations as occasions of merit by transforming these obstacles into means of sanctification.

Also, one of the characteristics of this spirituality should be the emphasis on the sanctifying realism of life such as it is in the midst of a materialistic world which wants no more of Christ and in which one must live by the spirit of Christ.¹

SECOND PRINCIPLE: In and through their duties of state

The spirituality of Catholic Action puts into the limelight and focuses our attention upon the sanctification of the duties of state considered as the surest manifestation of the will of God.

Once a soul has freely made its decision concerning a state of life, after it has prayed, sought advice, and made use of reason, faith and the virtue of prudence to know the will of God in its regard, all the duties which its state requires are the certain expression of the Divine will: family duties, professional duties and those relating to daily work, and civic duties.

A. FAMILY DUTIES

The normal state of life for the layman is marriage. There already exists (and has existed for twenty years) the spirituality, so full of promise, thanks to the courageous efforts of the Association of Christian Marriage, which reveals to the Christian spouses the splendor of their state, its place of honor in the assembly of the saints alongside Popes, Confessors and Virgins, and its providential mission for the extension of the reign of Christ.

The spirituality of Catholic Action will combat the idea that sanctification is impossible in the married state and that it suffices for the spouses who remain in the ordinary state of life to be content with a fair mediocrity without the hope or desire of going higher.

It will show them that if sanctification can and ought to be envisaged for the spouses, it is not as though it were in spite of marriage, through that state itself, by the very exercise of their conjugal life.

In the light of a prudent and sure doctrine, it should also make clear that the spouses find the very principle of their Christian perfection in their conjugal life. It is evidently in this sense that the cross is there as everywhere the great means of purification and progress in perfection through the renunciations and sacrifices which that state brings, with its conquest of egoism, mutual support, and the trials of securing a livelihood. But Christian perfection is also to be found in that state through their human love itself, human love with its legitimate joys, its happiness resulting from total donation, love so transfigured by the sacrament of marriage that their union becomes a participation, for both of them, in the holy life of God, in His charity, and, as they should desire, in His divine Paternity.

Finally, this spirituality ought to prepare the souls of parents for their grave and sublime responsibilities to their children. It should teach them to form in these children Christ Himself, according to the beautiful program which Pius XI traced in his Encyclical of 1929: "The proper and immediate end of Christian education is to cooperate with the action of divine grace in the formation of a true and perfect Christian, that is, in the formation of Christ Himself in men regenerated by Baptism."

While emphasizing the work of sanctification in and through marriage, the spirituality of Catholic Action will take care not to neglect the nobility and grandeur of celibacy, willed through an ardent love of God and souls. It is a secret to none that a great number of souls today seek to realize in Catholic Action total giving of self to God through the service of their fellowmen, and that a new form of life, completely consecrated to the Church, is envisaged. This form of life is no longer on the plane of the moral virtue of religion through the vows, but is in the sphere of the theological virtue of charity in a most intimate participation in the pastoral charity of the Bishop.

B. PROFESSIONAL DUTIES AND THOSE OF DAILY WORK

The spirituality of Catholic Action will teach the layman to find God, to be united to Him, no longer only at the time of their natural activity, but also in and through their professional duties of state.

Not only on the occasion of an action, i.e., by a previous prayer or a preliminary offering, excellent and necessary things for putting oneself in the true path of duty, the search for the divine will.

Not only **in** the act, **during** the act, i.e., by ejaculatory prayers or moments of recollection and silence, beneficial practices, on condition however that they do not distract from the act and that the soul does not use them as a means for evading the reality of the present duty or for exercising in some way what it considers as inferior in the so-called "profane" work.

But sanctification, union with God, by the action itself – the work, the duty of state – because it is there that the soul is united to the divine will and fulfills it effectively.

The spirituality of action will take care to face the problem which is presented to Christians caught between, on the one hand, their desire for union with God, and, on the other, their pressing, imperious, absorbing duty to act, which at first seems to withdraw them from God, at least from the thought of God.

Now, the problem is not to seek God in a habitual² union of thought – evidently impossible in any continued manner and opposing, as it does, the conscious application of the spirit so often demanded by the work – but in a union of will.

The problem is not, either, to stop an action which may be called a strict duty of state to seek God in prayer, which would in itself be superior.

Our Lord Himself has pointed out the principle which clarifies all these difficulties: "Not all who say, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of Heaven; but those who do the will of my Father."

To fulfill the divine Will: that is the supreme rule, the law of action as also – let us not forget it – the law of prayer: "fiat voluntas tua."

On this rule, Jesus has also given us the example in His life: "He has done all things well"; that is the solution for action; to do all things well; to have the constant preoccupation to perform the duty of state to perfection, because that is the will of the Father. This solicitude is, therefore, not exterior to the work, added from the outside to the work one accomplishes. It is immersed in the works; it is bound up with them; it "informs" them; it so transforms them from the inside, in seizing the work in its most profound aspects, that when this task is done it will finally take on a completely new form and the result obtained by this effort will be completely different, according as this solicitude for perfection did or did not animate the soul of the one who performed it. In one word, this disposition involves the giving of the whole being to the divine will in the duty of state of the present moment. At the same time that it thus effectively puts into practice charity in the union of the will to the divine will, it will have required as a preliminary condition a constant exercise of faith to discover this divine will in the duty of state of the present moment.

The spirituality of Catholic Action will thus at the same time restore to work the true place which the divine law has assigned it in the sanctification of man. Work, objectively, glorifies God, first of all because it is a cooperation in the Creation and Redemption, and then because it is a service useful to human dignity. Moreover it glorifies God in this that, in itself, it implies the exercise of all human activity, the expenditure of energy, the use of those faculties with which the Creator has gifted the human person, intelligence and wills intelligence, because the work entails the use of the powers of the spirit; will, in this that after Original Sin, it requires sons pain, a patient effort, some sacrifice. Now, all reasonable and free activity, applied to a work good in itself, is homage rendered to the liberality of the Creator. When, in addition, it is in submission to the divine law and in search of the will of God, a collaboration in the Creation, a cooperation in the Redemption, then let us not hesitate to say that such activity is the purest expression of a true and perfect charity.

C. CIVIC DUTIES

Finally, the spirituality of Catholic Action will not be complete if it does not form souls to the love of the common good, to devotedness to the State, to respect for that superior law of "social charity" as Pius XI calls it, or again "of political charity," – in one word to the ensemble of civic virtues which, outside of an above all party politics, causes one to seek the common good of the temporal sphere as ordained to the complete destiny of man, to the supernatural destiny of men living in society and called to tend toward the supreme Good in and through this human community.

Indeed, how marvelously had the great St. Francis de Sales understood this important principle of the sanctification of the duties of state and the possibility for laymen to perfect themselves in their life in the midst of the world. The amiable and saintly Doctor, from whom a spirituality of Catholic Action could today borrow much, says in his "Introduction to a Devout Life:" "It is an error as well as a heresy to wish to banish the devout life from the company of soldiers, the shops of artisans, the courts of princes, the households of married people.

THIRD PRINCIPLE: Sanctification of laymen in and through their apostolic life

Some years ago we had the great pleasure of thanking Dom Chautard, at the Trappist monastery of Sept-Fonds, for the good his little book, SOUL OF THE APOSTOLATE, had done for us, as for so many other young men of our generation.

"Very reverend Father," we said to him, "you have shown that the interior life is the life of all apostolic work, that without it the apostolate is vain and even runs the risk of being dangerous. We respectfully

express the desire that you now write another book recalling the great duty of the apostolate and the development of Catholic Action. "How to reach the perfect life in and through the apostolate." And the great contemplative answered: "Yes, I believe that today there are in the world mystics of action."

The spirituality of Catholic Action must in fact define the sanctifying value of this apostolic life. There, too, it is no longer simply a matter of showing how it is possible for souls to perfect themselves by means of the apostolate in the sense that apostolic action implies the exercise of numerous moral virtues which purify self and prepare it for union with God: abnegation, patience, obedience to the Church: nor even in the sense that the apostolic life, causing the apostle to realise his powerlessness when confronted with souls, obliges him to cast himself upon God, placing his trust only in the grace of Christ.

It is there, it seems to us, that the spirituality, distinguishing clearly from the exterior means of the apostolate the very essence of Catholic Action as defined by the Pope (participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy) will seek to produce in souls a fundamental disposition of the virtue of charity: turning souls from all that is dependence on self and egoism – though it be covered by pretexts of spiritual advancement – it will lead them to the most generous gift of themselves to Christ and to the Church by the love of God and of souls; it will urge them to maintain themselves constantly in an interior state of oblation for the extension of the reign of God, the growth of the Mystical Body, the conquest of souls.

Thus the spirituality of Catholic Action should develop in souls the mind of Christ and of the Church through a joyful and constant submission – springing from the spirit and the heart – to the hierarchy of that Church of which Bossuet says that she was "the permanent incarnation of the Son of God." Not a servile submission, but one of loving children who, conscious of their heavy responsibility to be in virtue of an authentic mandate the witnesses of Christ, the messengers of the Church in their providential milieu of life, are entitled to count on very special graces, in the development in themselves of the divine life which will intensify their intimate union with the Church, their participation in its own apostolic life, to the degree to which they are effectively faithful to their interior oblation each time that service of others presents itself to them and that Christ calls them to give themselves to Him in souls. Will not Christ intensify His life in the souls which thus give themselves to Him? Will not God give Himself to those who give themselves to Him in others? A most sure sanctification is this charity which associates them in the "activity of the hierarchic apostolate," as Pius XI says, In this service of devotedness to souls to which the Bishop has vowed himself till death and which is the precise element which makes him the "perfector," i.e., the one who has the mission and the power to lead souls to perfection.

In summary:

It is among human beings, human things, human institutions, acts of human life, that the apostle of Catholic Action seeks the kingdom of God and labors for its extension. Moreover, he seeks it in giving himself to his brothers, in cooperating for the common good of the entire Body, in giving to others what he receives, enriching himself with divine life, filling Himself with Christ and giving glory to the Holy Trinity.

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ASCETICISM AND MYSTICISM OF CATHOLIC ACTION

Most Rev. Emile Guerry Coadjutor-Archbishop of Cambrai

This is the second part of the article, "A Spirituality of Catholic Action."

The first part presented the goal of perfection as the end of all Christian spirituality and then endeavored to show how one engaged in Catholic Action must seek this perfection through life in the world, through the duties of state, and through the apostolic life.

In this second part the author briefly sketches some general principles of asceticism and mysticism in order to show how to orientate one's efforts toward the constant renewal of the true mystical aspects of life for the apostolate.

The translator is Bro. Joseph Stefanelli, S.M., Catholic High School, Hamilton, Ohio.

THE DIFFERENT PARTS OF A SPIRITUALITY OF CATHOLIC ACTION

Every spirituality contains an asceticism and a mysticism: an asceticism which directs the personal effort of the soul under the influence of grace in combating its defects, overcoming obstacles, purifying self; a mysticism, which emphasizes the special action of the Holy Spirit in the life of union with God.

It will surely be understood that here we can only sketch briefly several general principles of orientation.

ASCETICISM

The spirituality of Catholic Action should, it seems to us, bring emphasis to bear on what we call the natural virtues for it is by them that the laymen will be in contact with the world, so easily influenced- by matters of honesty, loyalty, integrity. For us Christians, these virtues have a name; they are called the infused supernatural moral virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance.

All chaplains and leaders of Catholic Action should make a profound study of the marvelous tract of St. Thomas on Prudence. Prudence is essentially the virtue of action. With his keen psychology, St. Thomas analyzes the three acts which make up the exercise of prudence: to deliberate (the small inquiry, the interior counsel which one holds within himself); to judge; to act. Here we easily recognize practically the same three acts of the method of specialized Catholic Action: observe, judge, act.

The more deeply one studies the virtue of fortitude, the more he will be struck with the many applications which it finds in the life of the laity, under a double forms that of patience in the face of the trials of life, material difficulties of security an existence, heavy charges of a family; that of courage and energy to remain faithful to their mission as witnesses to Christ in the midst of laicized world. The virtue of fortitude implies, for example, an asceticism of the intellect demanded of the laity so as not to allow themselves to be disturbed by the errors and prejudices of their milieu, the false idols of the society in which they live constantly, – an asceticism of the will to remain energetically faithful to the moral law and firm in action despite all obstacles. To what a degree must this virtue of fortitude be practiced – often, indeed, to a heroic degree – by our admirable jockeys in their factory and all our militants of Catholic Action!

The virtue of justice will cause them to respect the rights of others by fidelity of their given word, loyalty and integrity in business, the achievement of a delicate and enlightened professional conscience.

Finally, it is not at all a rigid asceticism which will impose upon them temperance in a world interested only in enjoyment and hostile to all interior discipline. Rigid asceticism of a pure heart in the midst of a society which cheapens the holiest things in human love and proclaims the right of the freedom of the passions and the senses through the written word, plays and movies and repeated conversations. Rigid asceticism of a heart detached and animated by the spirit of poverty so as never to be a slave to the thousands of parsing goods which are ceaselessly sought for by those who have the duty of gaining a livelihood and protecting themselves against the insecurity of tomorrow; an asceticism which trains the heart not to enjoy selfishly the gifts received from God.

No, the layman need not, on principle, seek ascetical practices outside of or alongside of his life: he has, under a thousand forms, the strict asceticism of the duty of state.

If, for the religious, obedience to the rule which determines for him his precise tasks, obedience to the call of the bell which indicates for him his duty at each moment, is a constant practice of renouncement of self-will, it will often happen, on the other hand, for a layman, for the mother of a family, for an apostle, that the renouncement of his self-will will consist in accepting the unforeseen daily events, in no longer belonging to himself, of looking constantly to others to give self to them. Of course, we have no intention of saying that a flexible rule of life is not most necessary for laymen so as to protect them from caprice and carelessness. But they must be ready to use to the maximum an asceticism, at times crucifying, of their life in the world, without experiencing the need for searching for other practices proper to other states of life.

Above all, let us not think that this asceticism is exercised only by the moral virtues: there is a superior asceticism which consists in the perfect exercise of the logical virtues of faith, hope, and charity in the generous, heroic effort to accomplish perfectly the will of God in the acceptance of the daily task, monotonous, tormenting, tiring, as also in the confident abandonment in the midst of trials, sorrows, sacrifices.

And this brings us to the mystical part of the spirituality.

MYSTICISM

It is likewise in their daily duties of state that the laymen will find the means of uniting their wills to the Divine will and of finding in this very union their sanctification. How?

We must be grateful to the Rev. Fr. Charmot for having clearly shown, in his recent book "Spiritual Doctrine for men of Action," how spirituality is not founded so much on God as on the fact that He is the first and universal CAUSE of all good – and that, in consequence, action, when it is a collaboration of man with God, is an abundant source of sanctity. It is not we who sanctify ourselves it is God who sanctifies us. It is He who divinizes the soul which collaborates with Him. It suffices to collaborate with the Divine Will and with the Divine Love so that God may see more freely in the soul and that the trace of Christ may make it more and more holy.

We recall also the distinction recently made by M. Maritain between the gifts of the Holy Spirit which pertain above all to contemplation and those which pertain to action. Even though the first – gifts of

wisdom and understanding – are so necessary for every apostle, is not the apostolic life nourished by the gifts of fortitude, counsel, filial piety and fear of God? It is not said that Joan of Arc, the Cure of Ars, St Vincent de Paul were great, contemplatives; yet who would dare pretend that they were not great mystics guided by the direct and Immediate action of the Holy Spirit?

The Spirit breathes upon all the members of the Mystical Body, of which He is the soul. The spirituality of Catholic Action should therefore lead those laymen determined to be true Christians not only to consider the state of grace as the most precious gift, but to live more and more, through it, the life of Christ and to render themselves responsive to the action of the Divine Spirit.

The Spirit communicates to each the mind of Christ and wishes him to participate intimately in the very life of the Son of God, in taking him to the Father... In each soul, He cries: "Abba, Father!" and leads it to offer itself with Christ and like Him for the glory of the Father through the Redemption of souls. The spirituality of Catholic Action should tend to produce in the souls of laymen this great docility to the spirit of Christ.

CONCLUSION

It is the whole of theology which is called upon to furnish the foundations of a spirituality of Catholic Action. We are merely at the starting point, facing an immense task.

In meditating on the tract of the Word Incarnate, we only begin to discover the depths and breadth of the law of the Incarnation, which will clarify the whole problem of Catholic Action.

Shall we not be led to plumb the depths of the austere and beautiful tract of the Redemption, if we wish a more penetrating understanding of the mission of each member of the Church to cooperate in the Redemption of the world? Is not the tract on the Church already considerably renewed by the development of the doctrine of the Mystical Body which attracts apostolic souls more and more?

What theological problems are presented by Catholic Action from which its spirituality will enrich itself – the sanctifying role of the hierarchy, the true nature of grace, a participation in the life of the Trinity, and even to the very bosom of the tract on the Trinity, the correct notion of the Divine missions.

There is not a single tract of dogmatic theology which will not have to bring its light to bear on this spiritual synthesis of Catholic Action.

Have we not already noted with joy in souls the marvelous riches given to them by the depths of the theology of the sacraments. Baptism, confirmation, marriage reveal successively the treasure of life and grace.

Is there not also the splendid development of the liturgical life of which we are every day the grateful witnesses of the enlightened group participation of the faithful in the divine sacrifice by the dialogue Mass and greater comprehension of the ceremonies of baptism, marriage, funerals, thanks to the use of liturgical tracts prepared for active assistance – a more lively solicitude for union with the Church through the diverse phases of the liturgical year – a keen sense of Christianity which in liturgical life develops in souls... Who can deny the part of Catholic Action, of our great movements, of the National Congresses of JOC AND JAC in this revival so full of promise, if it remains within the lines of true tradition?

Finally, moral theology itself will have to study in a more profound manner the notions of perfection, of the

states of perfection, the true value of work, the importance of the natural virtues, the need for Christians not to consider their religion above all as a moral tract, but, in discovering the foundations of Christian morality in the filial adoption, as the duty of learning how to act as children of God in every sphere of their lives, to work as children of God, to recreate as children of God, to love and to serve as children of God.

1° It is not a matter of rejecting the world to belong to Christ, but of leading the world back with us to Christ.” – Father Roche *Chrétien dans le monde*, p. 195

2° (We say “habitual” for it is well understood that all life, to be profound, must have its moments of silence, of recollection, of renewal of contact with God by faith. We purposely refrain from using the word “contemplation” so as to avoid raising the great question of the relations between contemplation and action, a problem which does not concern us here.)