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CATHOLIC ACTION  
IN  
IRELAND

BY  
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# Catholic Action in Ireland.

## I.—The Meaning of "Catholic Action."

ON all sides it is realised that the greatest menace to religion at the present day is the growth of a new paganism, which is spreading over the world and manifesting itself in so many ways that it has become almost impossible to avoid its contaminating contact. The leaders of some religious bodies have despaired of combating this evil and have tried to make terms with it by modifying their doctrines to suit "modern thought" or sacrificing part of their moral code.

The Catholic Church, however, immutable in its doctrine and inflexible in its moral teaching, because both are founded on Divine Truth, has set out to combat this danger with new weapons. The call to action has come from the Church's Supreme Head. Pius XI, putting into more specific form what was already said by his two immediate predecessors, has called for the organised co-operation of the laity in the work of the apostolate, and in calling this "Catholic Action," he has made the term the watchword of a new Crusade.

The participation of the laity in the work of the Church is nothing new. It was the means by which the Church

The need of  
lay-help.

conquered the world, for in the earliest times priests and people worked together to make known the teaching and the ideals of Christ. It was only when the victory seemed to be won that lay co-operation became less. In the years of organisation that followed the overthrow of paganism the work of teaching became the chief activity of the Church, and there was less scope for the lay helper. Later, when explorers opened up new lands, it was the clergy who went to preach the Faith,

while the laity assisted at home by their prayers and alms.

Now, circumstances have changed once more, and to a large extent we are back in the conditions in which the early Christians found themselves. This change has come about gradually: a succession of self-styled reformers and philosophers led many through plausible error to doubt and disbelief. Heretics in one generation beget pagans in the next, and once again the members of the Catholic Church find themselves surrounded by those who, in practice, and often in theory as well, do not acknowledge God.

It is natural that the means adopted to bring Christianity back once more into the hearts and lives of men should be that which already proved successful—the lay apostolate supporting the apostolate of the bishops and priests.

As the term "Catholic Action" may be understood in various ways, it is hardly surprising that a certain amount of confusion should exist regarding its meaning in the minds of those who have not had an opportunity of reading the Holy Father's numerous pronouncements about it.

Two things definitely it does *not* mean: it is not just any form of Catholic activity chosen by an individual according to his own inclinations; nor, at the other extreme, is it to be understood as referring solely to those Catholic organisations which exist in certain European countries and are themselves called "Catholic Action."

The Pope has given to the term a definite technical meaning—it is the organised work of lay Catholics,

helping the bishops and priests in their God's Army. mission of saving souls and defending the Church from its enemies. It is the formation of lay Catholics into an army, to fight, not for material advantages for themselves, not to gain the satisfaction of triumphing over enemies, not to acquire earthly power, but to fight God's battles against the paganism that is trying to reconquer the world.

The varieties of the work are almost numberless and depend on the particular needs of time and place. It extends into every phase of activity other than politics—

in the sense of party politics. It must meet every need that arises, now fighting the battle of Catholic education, now insisting on the proper observance of Days of Obligation, now combating anti-Catholic legislation, now smoothing out misunderstandings that lead to class warfare, now purifying public amusements, now providing assistance for neglected sick poor—in a word, doing the work of the lay arm of the Church, accomplishing those tasks that are beyond the reach of the bishops and priests.

Though the Pope's call is for united work, it is as much a call to be answered by individuals as was that of Urban II

A Call  
to  
Individuals. in the eleventh century when he announced the First Crusade, or that of Pius IX when he called for volunteers to defend the Papal States in 1860. There are in every country splendid lay men and women who

are doing heroic work, real missionary work, for Christ's cause. Whatever their occupation, they are in their own lives the embodiment of Catholic principles, they spread the knowledge and practice of these principles by their words and actions, and they are ready to fight for them if necessary. We all know people of this kind and we realise that the world would be very different if there were more of them. The Pope calls for more, and asks them to work together—Catholic Action is, as has been said, a new Crusade.

There are three requirements for those who are to take part in this Catholic Action: they must want to take part in it, they must be able to do so, and they must keep in touch with others who are working to the same end. Spiritual preparation is necessary for the first. The desire must come from zeal, one must be a good Christian oneself before one can influence others—and for this the Pope advises the making of retreats. Knowledge of Catholic principles is necessary for the second—consequently the Pope recommends study clubs. Organisation is necessary for the third.

Organisation is essential for the success of Catholic Action. The Pope clearly looks forward to the day when this organisation will be far more complete than anything

we have experience of, so far, but in the meantime he leaves details of organisation to the hierarchy of each country.

In Italy alone he has taken a personal part, and there Catholic Action is organised as a special institution, with

Organisation  
in Foreign  
Countries.

National and Diocesan Councils, and Associations of various kinds depending on it, covering every aspect of life and stimulating activity and watching progress by means of national and local congresses.

So much importance does His Holiness attach to this organisation that a special article safeguarding it was inserted in the Concordat between the Holy See and the Italian State.

Spain, under the guidance of its Cardinal Primate, one of the most remarkable of living churchmen, has to a large extent imitated the Italian organisation, and last year held the first National Congress of Catholic Action.

In no other country has there been the same minute organisation of a special body to develop Catholic Action. In Germany the bishops contented themselves with issuing a circular letter, a masterly document containing the outline of a comprehensive programme of Catholic Action, and giving instruction for the federation of parish and diocesan activities instead of the formation of a new association.

In France, the land of organisations rather than of organisation, it would be hard to find any sphere of Catholic usefulness which is not already covered by some existing association. By all these Catholic Action has been accepted as a guiding principle. Something similar are the conditions in the United States, where diocesan and national federation of various Catholic activities already exists. There, opinion is divided as to the desirability of further organisation. Tendencies seem to indicate that it will come, but not yet.

## II.—The Need of Catholic Action in Ireland.

SOME people might be inclined to argue that since Ireland is almost wholly Catholic, this organised lay co-operation with the clergy, this Catholic "forward movement," which is so much required in

foreign countries, may not be necessary amongst us. A brief examination, however, of the actual position of Catholics and Catholicity in Ireland will show that it is very much needed. This, too, is the opinion of the Irish Hierarchy, for the Decrees of the Maynooth Synod of 1927, promulgated in November, 1929, urge on all the promotion of Catholic Action "by which Catholics are united in suitable societies to form an organised army which shall put forth all its powers to mould the public conscience in accordance with Catholic principles, to foster religion, to defend it in public and private and to restore the Christian mode of life."—*Decree No. 233.*

The position of Catholicity in Ireland is without parallel in any other country. Though there is probably in the world to-day no other nation more loyal to the Faith, more constant in the practice of religion and more thoroughly Catholic at heart, yet a Catholic public opinion is notably lacking in Ireland. There is a tendency to confine religion to private life and to accept without challenge the Protestant point of view on all matters of the day.

This subservience to Protestant opinion is often unconscious, for to such a degree does a Protestant mentality prevail that many are hardly aware that there is such a thing as a Catholic point of view on questions other than those that are purely religious. Sometimes, however, the adoption of the Protestant view is practically deliberate, owing to a pathetic belief that the judgment of Protestants is the expression of a broader and wider culture and experience.

This condition of things is easily accounted for by our sad history—by the fact that our country was for centuries under the rule of an intolerant, anti-Catholic, foreign power. When, for generation after generation, all the important posts were held by Protestants, when all positions of authority in the gift of the government were filled by Protestants, when practically all the owners of large estates and all the chief landlords of the country were Protestants, when commerce and trade were in the hands of Protestants, when entry to the learned professions was

reserved to Protestants, when, in a word, Irish Catholics were treated as pariahs in their own land, it is not a matter of wonder that Catholics should have developed what is called in modern philosophic jargon "an inferiority complex," but which is more bluntly described as "the slave mind."

Irish Protestants, on the other hand, gaining their power by persecution, continuing to hold it by oppression, and maintaining it down to our own day by intolerance, came naturally to regard themselves as belonging to a superior caste, and became accustomed to pass judgment and express opinions as if their authority and their right to dictate were beyond question.

Neither side has yet fully recognised the change that has come, and it is time for Irish Catholics, who are ninety-three per cent. of the population of the Saorstát, to show that they are at last masters in their own land. It took many decades to revive in Ireland that spirit of nationality that was stifled almost out of existence in the majority of the people; it may take as long to create a well-informed and vigorous Catholic opinion in Ireland, but it must be done. It can only be done by a united effort on the part of those lay Catholics who are conscious of its necessity—in other words, by Catholic Action.

It will take a long time to clear away all the false ideas that become current wherever the English language spreads—false historical views popularised by Protestant historians, wrong ideas on morality and justice that are accepted as axioms in the Protestant Press. It will be long, for instance, before people finally realise that the "Ages of Faith" were not "Dark Ages," that religious intolerance has been practised far more by Protestants than by Catholics, that politicians who fought against religion were not necessarily champions of liberty, that Spain is not a dead nation, that it is possible for Catholics to be possessed of business capacity, that it is not "bad form" to mention religion in public, and so on.

It will be part of the work of Catholic Action to combat

these false ideas wherever they appear, so that Catholics may realise the extent to which falsehood has been used as a weapon by the opponents of their Faith, and, knowing the truth, may have greater pride in their religion.

It is, however, of even more urgent importance to put a check to that continued deference to Protestant opinion which is brought to such a pitch in public affairs in Ireland that the views of the Catholic majority are often completely ignored. Catholics in public life are too sensitive to the criticism of the Protestant Press in Ireland and England, and too prone to do injustice to their co-religionists in order to win Protestant approval for their "broadmindedness." It will be time enough to consider the acceptance of Irish Protestant standards of broadmindedness and toleration when theory is confirmed by practice in that part of Ireland in which Protestants are in the majority.

A moment's consideration will bring to mind some of the hundred ways in which Catholic sentiment has been denied expression in our Catholic country: English bank-holidays are observed rather than the feasts of the Church; the blessing of God is not invoked on the opening of the Oireachtas or the law-courts; the prohibition of divorce is not included in the constitution; the National University remains "non-sectarian," as established under English rule, so that it has not even the legal power possessed by Trinity College to erect a chapel in the grounds of any of its colleges, and it has no provision in the official curriculum of its medical school for any instruction in Catholic ethics; there is no censorship of stage productions; public theatrical performances are permitted on Sundays; the public sale of contraceptives is allowed. A Catholic "Reformation" is needed in Ireland—one that will re-Catholicise public life and public opinion.

It is completely foreign to Catholic teaching and to the practice of Catholics to do injustice to those of other religions who dwell amongst them, or to exhibit hostility towards them because they are of a different creed, but to sacrifice Catholic principles through fear of offending an aggressive minority is unjustifiable weakness and folly.

The field for Catholic Action in Ireland is not restricted to the creation of a Catholic public opinion and to the infusion of a consciousness of their own strength into the Catholic majority, but until these aims are accomplished it will not be possible to deal satisfactorily with many other pressing problems.

### III.—The Organisation of Catholic Action in Ireland.

FROM the many statements of the Holy Father on the subject of Catholic Action it is quite clear that he wishes it to be introduced into every country. The Bishops of Ireland, in the recently promulgated Decrees of the Synod of Maynooth, warmly second his wishes by exhorting all, both clergy and laity, to promote it. It is necessary, therefore, to consider the means by which Catholic Action may be put into operation in our country.

There are three suppositions to be considered :—

1. If Catholic Action is already in existence in everything but name, nothing new need be done.
2. If the work is being done fully by different societies working as separate units, all that is necessary is their federation.
3. If the full programme of Catholic Action is not yet in operation in Ireland, a new organisation is necessary.

The first of these can be ruled out of consideration at once. It is obvious that Catholics in Ireland are not "united in societies to form an organised army which shall put forth all its powers to mould the public conscience in accordance with Catholic principles," which is the ideal of the Irish Hierarchy (Decrees of Maynooth Synod, 233).

The second requires closer scrutiny, especially as the Pope repeatedly insists on the fact that Catholic Action

does not constitute a special and exclusive form of action, but, as far as is possible, makes use of existing organisations. If we pass in review the various societies in Ireland engaged in work similar to that of Catholic Action, we find that a large amount of the ground is undoubtedly covered.

There are, in the first place, those organisations, specially commended in the Maynooth Decrees: The Catholic Protection and Rescue Society, for the check of "Souperism," the societies for the protection of emigrant girls, the St. Vincent de Paul Society and the Catholic Truth Society. In addition to these there are, apart from these bodies that have a definitely religious aim, such as Third Orders, Sodalties and Confraternities, others whose object is to work for the Foreign Missions, to engage in Social Study, to promote Social Action on a Catholic basis, to bring Catholics together in social intercourse, and so on, and there are some which aim definitely at safeguarding Catholic rights and furthering Catholic interests in the community.

Many of these societies are excellently organised and all of them have many members who in their public and private lives are models of everything that Catholics should be, but still it cannot be said that all that is required to constitute that "organised army" desired by the bishops is the federation of the societies already in existence in the country. The reason is that the scope of these societies is limited to the particular work, charitable, social, etc., for which they are established, and, as active work for the maintenance and spread of Catholic principles in public life is not part of the programme of most of them, united action for this end would not be achieved merely by their federation.

It seems, therefore, that the third hypothesis is the one that must be accepted. A new organisation is essential, not one which would in any way interfere with the work of existing societies, but one which would operate largely through their members and probably in many cases through their actual organisation. It would be a body to which men and women and young people of both sexes could belong, one whose members, while engaged in

What we need.

various Catholic activities, according to their inclination and opportunity, would be pledged to Catholic solidarity—to united work for the furtherance of Catholic principles in whatever way would be determined by the Central Council of the organisation.

The relation of this new organisation to those already in existence would be similar to that of, for instance, the Pioneer Total Abstinence Association to such bodies as the St. Vincent de Paul Society or Catholic Truth Society. The fact that a person who belongs to one of these two Societies is also a Pioneer does not in any way interfere with his work as a member of them—such a person could also belong to the Catholic Action Association without being thereby a less efficient member of any other Catholic Society to which he might belong. Members could be enrolled in this Association by taking a "Catholic Action Pledge" to united work for the Catholic cause.

It can hardly be doubted that an organisation such as this would in a very short time have an enormous membership. Irish Catholics feel the need of it, for they realise that only by using their combined strength can they make their will prevail. As individuals, for instance, they often feel burning indignation at the suggestiveness, and sometimes downright immorality of certain films and theatrical performances in our theatres, but, not being united, they are powerless to take any action. If a strong Catholic Action Association were in existence, whose members would refuse to attend any theatre that was placed on a "black list," there would be more respect for Catholic opinion on the part of theatre managers. Similarly, at present if a newspaper or periodical shows continual prejudice against Catholics and introduces special pleading against Catholicity in its news reports, it is almost impossible for Catholics to take any effective action. A Catholic Action Association, however, could make its influence quickly felt by placing such a paper on its "black list," and so closing its advertising columns to firms that wished to receive Catholic support.

In insisting thus on respect for Catholic opinion, there

What  
United Action  
could  
Accomplish

could be no charge of injustice levelled against those pledged to Catholic Action. If public concerns, such as theatres or newspapers, do not cater for Catholics, they must expect to depend for support on non-Catholics alone.

Since non-Catholics have been accustomed to force their standards of morality on the Irish public, we may naturally expect that they would use every effort to continue to do so, but Irish Catholics, if they were united, would be in a position to prevent them. Catholics have only to unite in order to show that, just as they would not allow the import of poisoned sweets, however profitable it might be to those engaged in the trade, and however numerous might be the people willing to buy them, neither will they allow the import of morally poisonous books, papers, films or plays. Furthermore, it is they, and not non-Catholics, however eminent in their own estimation and however influential their coterie, who are to decide what is morally poisonous, and therefore unacceptable.

In the same way, organised Catholic Action would be able to put an end to the anti-Catholic intolerance which still exists. It is well known that there are firms in Ireland which, while soliciting Catholic support, themselves boycott Catholics and reserve all positions of importance for their non-Catholic employees. From such firms Catholics, if united, would naturally withdraw their support. Nor, again, could there be any suspicion of injustice in doing this—Catholics would be merely using their strength to put down intolerance, which is something altogether alien to Catholic sentiment and practice.

The existence of a strong Catholic Action Association would have another salutary effect; it would put strength into weak Catholics. Probably nothing Teaching in Ireland in the present century has Self-Reliance. done more to give self-reliance to young Irish Catholics than the Catholic Boy Scout movement. Though yet only in its infancy, it has served to expose the insignificance in Ireland of the khaki scout movement, which in this country was wholly Protestant in spirit, and to show the force that Catholicism can be when properly organised. In a much greater degree would united action, militant always and aggressive

if necessary, give Catholics confidence in themselves and pride in their religion, by showing them the strength of their numbers and their dominating position in the country. Those Irish Catholics who cling to the fringe of Protestant society, who set up their own standards of what a good Catholic should be, and find fault with bishops and priests for disagreeing with them, who think that the veneer of "respectability" which their sons and daughters get by going to Protestant schools or to Trinity College is worth the risk of exposing their faith and morals to danger—these, though the chief feeling with which they should be regarded is one of contempt, are also, however, to be pitied for their ignorance and for allowing themselves to be guided by false standards. The sight of Catholic solidarity, and the determined effort on the part of Irish Catholics to make their country in every way worthy of their religion, would open even the eyes of these half-blind semi-Catholics and make some of them, at least, defiant, instead of cringing.

One other important result of organised Catholic Action would be the removal of the greatest of evils existing in Ireland, "Souperism." The continuance of this vile traffic in human souls is the worst blot on our Catholic country, and the fight which a loyal band of workers has carried on against it has so far failed, simply because of the apathy of the majority. If no other end were to be achieved by a Catholic Action Association than the extermination of "Souperism," its formation would be fully justified.

While the effectiveness of an organisation of Catholic Action would depend largely on the force of its numerical strength, mere numbers would in themselves be insufficient. An army which is going to win campaigns by moral force must be as closely organised as one that uses physical weapons. For that reason, mass enrolment of groups of people in a Catholic Action organisation, or the wholesale allegiance of existing Catholic Societies would be quite useless. As, in order to be effective in Ireland, Catholic Action would have to be a kind of Catholic Fascism, as its organisation would, to a certain

Detailed  
Organisation.

extent, have to follow Fascist lines. Members would have to be formed into small groups, of which a certain number would form a centre, whose representatives would, in turn, form district, and then diocesan, provincial and national councils. There would have to be separate units for men, women, boys and girls, and in each a closely-knit organisation would be essential.

Though *action*, in the sense of which instances have been given, would be a large part of the work of the Association, and the main part of its work as one powerful organisation, that would not constitute by any means the whole of Catholic Action. All members would be expected to engage in some form of Catholic activity.

It is natural to suppose that the members of those various societies which already exercise Catholic Action in social works or works of charity would all give their allegiance to this great Catholic crusade, and that thus the societies of which they are members would be linked up with the Council of Catholic Action.

Perhaps by this means that much-desired and long-delayed federation of Catholic activities in Ireland would be at last achieved. New activities which are needed would inevitably follow. (For example, there is urgently required a small association of well-informed Catholics who would watch the daily papers carefully, note the errors relating to Catholic doctrine or practice, and the biassed reports circulated by non-Catholic and sometimes anti-Catholic news agencies, and publish corrections of them at once.) Perhaps we might even see before many years have passed a National Catholic Action Congress, at which we should not merely discuss our needs, but take prompt measures to supply them.

It may be objected that an Association of the kind that has been suggested is too vague in its purpose to attract members, that people will not give adhesion to a body which is only held together by a promise to do something unspecified, at some future, undetermined time. But, it can be answered, there is nothing vague about Catholic principles, and a solemn pledge to uphold and propagate them is a very definite object—quite as definite as, for example, a Total Abstinence pledge.



If all, or even a large proportion of the members of the Third Orders, Sodalties and Confraternities, of the Young Men's Societies, of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, of the members of similar societies for women, of Children of Mary Sodalties, of the Ladies of Charity, of the Legion of Mary, of Mission Auxiliaries, of the members of organisations for the young, Boy Scouts, members of Temperance Associations, school and parish Sodalties, were to take the Catholic Action pledge, and were from time to time, in different places, to hold mass meetings which would inspire mutual courage and demonstrate their united strength, many of the abuses that disgrace our country would speedily end, for the voice of a Catholic nation would be heard and its will would be felt.

**A Catholic**  
**Nation's**  
**Voice.**

All this may seem a dream, but it is possible, and it is needed. It is for the laity to do their part to make it a reality. In Catholic Action, as the Pope wishes it to be, priests are chaplains (" Assistants " is the name he prefers). the organisation itself is composed entirely of lay people—and, it might be said, of young people. The President of the Italian Association, appointed by the Pope a year ago, Augusto Ciriaci, is a veteran in experience in Catholic activity, but he is only thirty-nine years of age. Experience shows that active, zealous, Catholic young men are well to the fore in every good work in Ireland. Will they undertake this work, perhaps the most important of all, to which they are invited by the Holy Father and urged by the Irish Hierarchy?