

SACERDOTAL ASPECTS OF THE  
LAY APOSTOLATE<sup>1</sup>

NOTWITHSTANDING that Catholic Action has been already so thoroughly investigated and discussed, it is possible that sufficient attention has not yet been paid to the important question of its sacramental basis and sacerdotal implications. It should hardly need to be said that Catholic Action, as a thing if not as a name, is not something new in the Church; it is, on the contrary, implied in the very notion of membership of the Mystical Body of Christ and is an integral part of Catholic truth.

It is important to insist that the Church of God is a hierarchic society in which membership implies also status, a status which derives immediately from oneness with Christ and a sharing in His perfections and powers, and therefore in His sacerdotal character. The nature and the degree of this sharing in the Priesthood of Christ varies considerably in the different grades within the Church; but it is a reality even in the lowest grade and gives an almost unbelievable quality and value to even the most commonplace participation in the liturgical life of the Church; and the source of this sacerdotal power throughout all the hierarchical grades is to be found in the Sacraments. Moreover, as far as Catholic Action in the modern sense is concerned, there is a particularly important source to be recognised in the Sacrament of Confirmation.

It is not necessary to examine this Sacrament very closely to discover indications that it was instituted by Our Lord for the specific purpose of making the laity an active and powerful agent in the apostolate. The express end of Con-

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<sup>1</sup> Extract from a paper read to members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. The particular thesis here set forth has been admirably treated in *Confirmation in the Modern World* by Mathias Laros (Sheed & Ward).

firmation is to give spiritual strength enabling the recipient to profess his faith fearlessly and, even more important, in some sense publicly. This latter embodies something proper to Confirmation. This is the meaning of the symbolism in the anointing of the forehead with chrism. The recipient, already a member of Christ by Baptism, is marked symbolically with an indelible sign in a place where it can be seen by all men, because he is to work no longer in private but publicly in union with the sacerdotal Christ. The use of chrism symbolises also a strengthening with the power of Christ the anointed one, for the furthering of His work in the world. The imposition of hands at Confirmation symbolises and in its symbolism actually reproduces the *virtus Christi*, the power of Christ, as it does in a more perfect manner in the ordination of a priest. In this way the Christian is conformed to Christ in a particular manner, not merely as any member of the Mystical Body must be but as one who has come of age in the Church and has the responsibilities of a fully competent and active member of that Body which is the instrument of Redemption for all men.

The Sacrament of Confirmation, then, completes and fulfils a man's spiritual personality, and has indeed been called the Sacrament of Personality. Whereas before he was merely a child in the Church now he is officially recognised as a completely socially-competent individual who has ceased to be hemmed in by the selfish boundaries and limited responsibilities of child-life. Here he begins to be concerned not only with the search for his own perfection, but is also concerned with the salvation of others. Moreover he does this officially, precisely in virtue of his character and social status as a confirmed Christian: in the words of St. Thomas, he acts "*quasi ex officio.*" The character imprinted on the soul at Confirmation is the official spiritual sign of the Christian's new status and shows a striking parallel to the sacerdotal character conferred by the Sacrament of Holy Orders. In the former sacrament, as in the latter, the Holy Ghost is given to man "*ad robur,*" for strength, and this more particularly in the matter of publicly professing the

faith. To realise the power of meaning behind this we need only hear Our Lord's words to His apostles: "You shall receive the power of the Holy Ghost coming upon you, and you shall be witnesses unto me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even unto the uttermost parts of the earth." (Acts i, 7-8.) This is a clear indication of the purpose and effect in the apostles of the Sacrament of Confirmation and the fulfilment of this promise is manifest in the stupendous effect of the first reception of that sacrament at Pentecost.

The faithful are to be, in the words of St. Peter, "living stones built up" in the fabric of the Church and not mere dead bricks; they participate in the Body of the Mystical Christ, Who is both Priest and Victim. We have evidence that this was always the express teaching of the Church in the words of St. Leo the Great who insists that the priesthood of the laity is divinely and even sacramentally appointed. In his sermon on the third anniversary of his accession to the Holy See we find these words: ". . . the anointing by the Holy Spirit consecrates men as priests, so that all Christians in spirit and in truth know themselves to be of a kingly race and priestly degree, with duties quite distinct from those of our special corporation of ordained priests." Nor does this in any sense lend colour to the denial of any distinction between the priesthood and the laity. In point of fact it makes the distinction all the more clear since it insists on a different sacramental basis for each character—that of Orders in the one case and that of Confirmation in the other. Yet, though the power conferred at Confirmation is distinct from and immeasurably less than that of Holy Orders, it is none the less truly priestly since it implies a real and special participation in the priesthood of Christ.

The idea underlying the notion of priesthood—*sacerdotium*—is that of public ministry—*sacra dans*—giving or administering sacred things to the people. A priest therefore is one who is a *mediator* between God and man, one whose specific duty it is to minister to other men the things

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of God. In this sense Jesus Christ was the perfect priest, for He gave to men the most essential of all the things of God, divine grace whereby alone man could be saved; and all other priests are ordained specifically to offer the sacrifice of the Mass and to administer the sacraments, thus giving to men the things of God. In a similar manner, though in a different sphere, the lay apostle shares the priesthood of Christ. By the sacramental character of Confirmation he receives the power to work "*quasi ex officio*" (as St. Thomas has it) for the spiritual well-being of his fellow Christians.

St. Thomas gives point to this by distinguishing the participation in the priesthood of Christ which is given in Baptism, in Confirmation and in Holy Orders. By Baptism the Christian is given a passive power to receive the effects of Christ's Priesthood; by Holy Orders an active power to administer the fruits of this Priesthood, regardless of his own personal sanctity; Confirmation however gives the recipient power to act as a fully responsible member of the Mystical Body for his own good and for that of society. This action is officially sanctioned by the Church, and every confirmed Christian possesses the power to perform each action as a consequence of his official status in the Church.

It is clear then, that Confirmation is in a special manner the Sacrament of Catholic Action; and this is the name that has been given it by Pope Pius XI. Catholic Action, therefore, cannot be looked upon as a mere addition to what we may call the regular life of the Church: far from being, as it perhaps appears to many, a work of supererogation, a spare time hobby, it undoubtedly pertains to the very fabric of the Church as an essential element and makes an urgent demand upon all Catholics, no matter what their positions or capabilities. By the very fact of his Confirmation, the lay Catholic has been endowed with a power, a real priestly power, which it is his right and duty to use, and this in a quasi-official capacity. His status or rank in the Church is changed and he is bound to live according to that status, just as the priest, in a more perfect degree, is also bound to live according to his rank, i. e. as a priest and not

a layman. Therefore Catholic Action cannot be regarded as a kind of Voluntary Aid Detachment in the Church. It is anything but "voluntary" in that sense. It is, as we have said before, integral and necessary to the very constitution of the Church of God.

We shall, in truth, find the essential meaning of Catholic Action in the character of Confirmation. St. Thomas describes Confirmation as standing, so to say, half way between Baptism and Holy Orders, and combining some of the characteristics of both. It gives a twofold power, to act at one and the same time both for one's own personal spiritual good and that of the Church at large. In this way a single human act is rendered capable of bearing twofold fruit, being for the benefit both of the individual and of society. Moreover his social activities in the Church are not only *incidentally* beneficial to the individual; they are so of their very nature. For social activity if undertaken from the current motives is the use of a talent given us by God, and this use of it is, from a private point of view, a fulfilling of our duty, an act of obedience to the will of God, and therefore merits grace. But if it is further undertaken in view of the rights and duties conferred by Confirmation, not only does the individual merit grace for himself; he earns it for society at large, and with a certain sacramental assurance of effectiveness. Yet this is not to say that the layman must rush blindly at what he imagines to be Catholic Action; becoming absorbed in external activities and completely forgetful of his own sanctification. It is of essential importance to recognise that Catholic Action is of its nature spiritual and supernatural, having a sacramental foundation and source. The main-spring of energy and efficaciousness is not the man himself, except secondarily, but supernatural grace. Catholic Action is necessarily on a supernatural level, even though it is expressed in the most natural way and uses many natural helps and instruments. Thus the promoters of any form of Catholic Social activity must bear this in mind and especially so where any complicated or intricate natural means or organisation has to be employed. No one will deny the great

value, and still less the absolute necessity, of organisation if social work is to meet with any measure of success. But it is possible for Catholic Action and the participants therein to become so engrossed in material organisation as to lose sight of the supernatural character of the work and so to get the whole thing out of focus.

If, however, the supernatural foundation of the work is preserved it is easily seen how it maintains a true character of Catholic Action. Material elements assume an auxiliary rôle; they are there only in so far as they can be sanctified and *incidentally* become of use for the sanctification of the Church in her members. In reality all merely human and material forces are transcended by Christian Social Action. It is something far above all questions of political parties; it may seek to apply Christian principles, principles of Faith and Morals to politics, but never in such a way as to ally, and still less to identify, the Church with any particular political party. The present Pope himself has proclaimed most deliberately that Catholic Action is not political action. The most material things of this world, like politics, war, industry, are allied to Catholic Action only to the extent that they can be sanctified and brought into relation with man's ultimate end. Likewise the least significant social act, when raised to this level, earns its place of note in the human and divine world of Christianity; then the smallest act of charity done by a brother of S.V.P. is no longer some private act of charity which has no significance for any others except those immediately concerned, but becomes an act of the Incarnate Christ working through His confirmed minister, an act which is by active participation a phase of the supreme act of God's divine love which was consummated on Calvary and like Calvary has repercussions throughout the whole of Christendom.

The appreciation of this truth is the aim of all apostles of Catholic Action. Much that has been said about the Mystical Body and participation by the laity in the Priesthood of Christ fails to make any contact with real life. But it may be of practical service to underline the truth that this doc-

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trine is embodied in Confirmation and finds its expression in a sacrament which confers a kind of layman's Holy Orders upon its recipients. It should be a spur to action to realize that he is really possessed of a sacerdotal character, and participates in the Priesthood of Christ by the very law and ordination of Jesus Christ Himself. This surely implies something vital and does impinge effectually on human life; it must affect in a very real way the layman's outlook on the work which is entailed in Catholic Action, on those who are to share his work as well as on those for whom he is to work. The knowledge that all those who share in the apostolate are animated by the same spirit and power of the Priesthood of Christ will be an incentive to transcend all petty differences and all distrustfulness and to see the whole Christian organism united for one purpose and prepared to give mutual aid towards attaining this end. There will be no thought of one type of Catholic Action trespassing on the preserves of another; there will be no question of the newer ousting the older. With a truly priestly mission to fulfil, the layman will aim to develop a priestly outlook on the objects of his missionary activity. If his work is charitable, in the accepted sense of that word, this will be specially important, if it is not to degenerate into mere philanthropy. Even the mere philanthropist will suffer a little for the benefit of his fellows because they are his fellows, human beings like himself. But the Christian lay apostle will suffer for them for a different reason, namely because they are one with him in the Mystical Christ, and because he sees them as in some sort images and reflections of Christ Himself; he is a priest in Christ, in his fashion a co-victim and co-offerer with Him. That was the power given him at Confirmation, a direct effect of that Sacrament which focusses his whole outlook. He understands that he has received a sacerdotal quality in the sacramental character given with Confirmation. His mission is to see men as redeemed by the sacrifice of the High Priest and to help to apply the fruits of that sacrifice to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. His work does not consist primarily in making men

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more comfortable in their worldly situations or merely lessening the misery of the poor. These things have their place, but a secondary one. His real concern will be to make the world conform to what God desired it should be when He sent His Incarnate Son, to help make the world more Godlike by helping to make men more Christlike. This is the commission he holds of duty and of right by the sacramental character of Confirmation; it remains but to be faithful.

GERARD MEATH, O.P.

*The following appeal has come into our hands and we think it well worth while to pass it on to our readers:*

### CATHOLIC WORKER

We fully recognise that a great many of you work hard all summer. But we do know, too, that you get some measure of relaxation. But meditate for a few moments on the lot of the fellow on the Bowery. There is no season for him. He still wakes at four or five in the morning, tired, hungry, without hope of any kind. The morning breadline is his first thought. After this miserable fare, he must turn his thoughts to food for the rest of the day. He might pan-handle. Perhaps he's lucky and a dishwashing job comes his way. Or he trudges the streets hoping against hope that he will come across the job that will get him out of the morass. Then he will retire to his flop-house or hallway just as tired, more despairing, not the slightest bit better off. Just the last month three men, emaciated and trembling, collapsed on the line and we had to call an ambulance for them. No, no vacation for him. Coffee and bread in the morning seems little to us, but it does mean much to him.

"The least of these" stretches forth his hand in silent supplication. He needs bread and the little hope that comes with a person's willingness to give it. We know you won't refuse, that you can't refuse. We are omitting our August issue. We feel it is more important to feed our brothers in Christ in this crisis.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

THE EDITORS.

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