

LAY ASSOCIATIONS IN THE CHURCH

By

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The Church is essentially communitarian. Her Founder willed her to be so. In the course of time, this communitarian reality has taken on concrete form in various ways. The apostles, members of the first community that formed around Jesus with their collaborators and immediate successors, founded little communities on all sides. Later, the "parishes" will be the basic ecclesial communities. But, to express the communitarian character of the Church there are also the various kinds of religious congregations, the third orders, the confraternities. In the last few decades, there has been a great development of movements of the apostolate and new associations of spirituality. Recently, there has been an explosion of basic communities, the characteristics of which, vary a great deal.

I would like, here, to turn attention to the associations made up mainly of laymen. The Pontifical Council for Laymen is in contact with at least seventy of these which have an international dimension.

In the past, these associations were generally promoted by priests, and sometimes also by religious orders or congregations. There have been, of course, well-known exceptions: it is enough to think of the St. Vincent de Paul Society by Frederick Ozanam. But it is particularly in the last fifty years that laymen have begun to create and direct associations within the Church, appealing to priests for their religious leadership.

THE "FAMILIES" OF ASSOCIATIONS

Although different, the Associations have certain affinities in common, based on the great aims by which they are inspired. In this way it is possible to group in "families" associations that are more or less similar.

The "family" of associations of piety or spirituality. This is certainly the most ancient "family" including the "confraternities" that have been in existence for many years, and also more recent movements for the renewal and deepening of Christian life.

The "family" of movements of apostolate, more generally designated with the name of general or specialized Catholic Action. To these movements is due the development in the whole Church, of awareness of the lay dimension of the life of Christians: its secular character, the necessity of living the faith within the secular reality, and the mission of laymen to commit themselves individually and collegially to transform the collective realities and the world in which they live.

The "family" of family associations. They have arisen from awareness of the riches of the marriage-sacrament and of the social dimension of the family as also from the great challenges that the family must meet as a human institution and as "ecclesia domestica".

The "family" of charitable or social action associations. Some of these came into being in the 19th century to give a Christian answer to the great needs of the poor and underprivileged. In the last few years, among other things, under the impulse of Vatican II, they have been undergoing a renewal in depth. This leads their members to the practice of individual charity more in harmony with present needs and the modern outlook. Furthermore, it leads to a keener realization that charity calls for sincere efforts to bring about real social justice,

The "family" of lay associations for Christian inspiration of the temporal. At a certain moment in history, particularly when, in Christian countries, civil society became increasingly marked by laicism, numerous associations of Christians were promoted to animate temporal society in a Christian way. Their structure and

their starting point are very different, but those that are most characteristic of the "family" are the Christian professional organizations of doctors, chemists, nurses, engineers, businessmen, men of learning, artists, etc. These associations try to give their members a formation to Christian life in harmony with the practical requirements, the positive contributions, the risks and challenges inherent in the profession exercised. They also wish to defend the principles of the Church in the professional environment in which they are present. These organizations have often had, to a varying extent, a trade-union character, that is, the purpose of defending the legitimate interests of their members in society.

Alongside the professional associations, in various European countries and particularly in those in which Christianity has won particular recognition, Christian organizations have come into being in the working-class, rural and artisan environments etc. Nor should we forget the associations that aim to ensure a Christian presence in the press, the cinema and television.

The "family" of movements of charismatic type. In the last few years various movements, more or less organized and structured, have sprung up in the Church, which wish, under the inspiration of the Spirit, to contribute to the renewal of individual family, ecclesial and social life. Some of these movements have a precise framework and can be considered as "associations". Others wish to have only minimal structures in order to be able to bring about an impetus of renewal within all the realities of ecclesial life (parishes, various associations).

INTEGRATION OF THE ASSOCIATIONS OF FAITHFUL IN THE GENERAL APOSTOLATE OF THE CHURCH

The Second Vatican Council expressly recognized the validity of associative life in the Church. As for priests and religious, it is right of the laity, as members of the people of God, to found associations, direct them as also to become members of the existing associations. The Council, however, stressed the fact that these associations must serve, not their own purposes, but the mission of the Church and therefore must be integrated in their right place in her apostolate. This integration requires the development, at every level of ecclesial life, of trustful relations of collaboration and communion with the Hierarchy. These relations, however, the

Council says, can assume various shades according to the different *actuositatem*" (n. 24), it is declared that some forms of apostolate can be organized explicitly by the Hierarchy and that for this reason they are integrated in a more organic and official way in the general mission of the Church.

Some topical problems. Everyone is aware that, in recent times, some associations — especially those for the young have going through a more or less serious crisis. The crisis in fact is not yet completely over, even though there are present increasingly great and valid elements for its solution. Catholic associations like the whole Church, have been marked by the deep cultural crisis that society has traversed in the last few years. It is enough, for example, to think of the criticism to which every more or less traditional institution has been subject in the last decade, to understand how the associations themselves have suffered from the anti-institutional or anti-organizational movement that has marked so many of our contemporaries.

The desire, certainly a legitimate one, not only to remedy existing problems, but to trace their underlying causes, has led some associations to undertake analyses of society. In spite of every good intention, some of these analyses are coloured by Marxism and go very little beyond a superficial approach to phenomena. The difficult attempts at post-conciliar "aggiornamento" carried out within the Church, have also been experienced by the associations, especially the more traditional groups, not without consequences of internal polarizations, conflicts, painful breaks. Some associations have decreased more and more in number. If formerly they gathered many members to whom they offered a "Communitarian environment" in which formation was given for life and for the Christian apostolate, now, their rank and file are made up only of small groups of militants who, moreover, are very busy in the world.

These few notes are enough to show how the associations are living through a time of reflection concerning their identity, a time of renewal of their aims and methods, a time of search for new ways of integration in the apostolate of the Church. Let us not forget, on the other hand, that the pastoral work carried out both at the level of the traditional parishes and at that of the new ecclesial communities which have arisen in the Church, also appeals to the associations to take their place again in a Church that is

deeply renewing its pastoral work in the light of the Second Vatican Council. Only a few years ago, one could not often find in the associations lay people who could really make a personal contribution and find the formation for their apostolate within the realities of life.

Today, and to an increasing extent, it is the basic community itself which makes this participation possible and wishes to give this formation.

ROLE OF THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE LAITY

One of the important tasks of the new Pontifical Council for the Laity is to follow carefully the evolution in progress in associative life within the Church. The associations continue to play a front-rank role with regard both to the formation of lay people and their individual and communitarian apostolate in the world today.

For the Pontifical Council for the Laity it is a question of being always well-informed about the policies and major activities of Catholic international associations; of developing a frank and open dialogue with the lay leaders and ecclesiastical assistants; of attending also, the great world assemblies, in order to be able to help, to stimulate, to correct if necessary, to bring forth the necessary collaboration, and to watch over the integration of this vast activity of lay people in the global apostolate of the Church.

With confidence in the Spirit who guides the Pastors of the Church and animates the Christian people, the action that the Pontifical Council for the Laity will be able to carry out will help to develop real ecclesial communion among all "for the salvation of the world".