FREEDOM FOR LAY ACTION

By P. G. WALSH

'CATHOLIC ACTION' seems to be out at the moment. One of the happiest results of the second Vatican Council has been the demise of that embarrassing phrase, with its associated image of the catholic commando, face blackened, foliage nodding in camouflage-net, creeping purposefully on some worldly redoubt. But while few will regret the death of the phrase and of the crude vision of the christian vocation often accompanying it, many must be dismayed at the creeping paralysis which has apparently succeeded it. The catholic christianity of the 'sixties and 'seventies in Britain has acquired new habits and a largely inward-facing vision, reflected in the clichés of 'renewal' through 'involvement' and internal 'dialogue'. Such introspection has admittedly some importance in the christian apostolate as a contribution to the refurbishing of the Church as the light on the hill-top, but that importance is being exaggerated at the present time. The distortion seems to be leading to an impoverishment of our religious life, of our vocation as christians in the larger world, because it presents a vision of christian activity which bores idealistic youth to death.

The conciliar documents in their blue-print for lay action contained little that was new or revolutionary, but they presented a well-balanced summary of the positive theories which had been developed over the previous generation. They propose three fields of fruitful action, and they propose them in the right order. First, action in the field of a person's professional work, this being envisaged as a continuation of God's creation and of Christ's saving redemption. Second, the apostolate within the family, the attempt to educate our children towards fuller lives as committed christians. And thirdly, action to promote the welfare of the Church within its own structures of parish and diocese. It is arguable that this threefold programme takes too little account of the *social* obligations of the christian in those countries where meaningful social action (in the sense of helping one's neighbour through organized societies) lies almost totally outside these ecclesiastical demarcations. (I am thinking of such organizations as Telephone Samaritans, Alcoholics Anonymous, Marriage Guidance, Shelter, and groups which or-

ganize overseas aid.) But if we restrict ourselves to the kinds of action discussed in detail in the council documents, we can obtain from them a programme for lay action in the right order.

Every generation of apostolic christians has of course to establish its own immediate priorities, and the period after the council certainly cried out for some pioneering work in the third form of action, namely the concerted efforts of bishop, priests and laity to evolve more democratic and more effective ecclesiastical structures. But the time has come to ask whether the part has not imperceptibly become the whole, whether this limited facet of action is not strait-jacketing the more authentic forms of christian living. Professor J. M. Cameron recently closed a review of the new Küng book, *Infallibility?*, by asking whether the Berrigan brothers were not a much more significant portent in the catholic christianity of our day than is Küng, whether they are addressing themselves to problems much more exercising for the christian conscience. This contrast between christian action *à la* Berrigan and the grappling with structures of authority *à la* Küng makes my point, for it has its relevance much more strikingly at the humbler levels.

The irony of the situation is that this change of direction in apostolic action has been achieved by people who a generation ago visualized their vocation as having as little as possible to do with the official church structures. In the 'forties the clarion call was for the 'christianization of the milieu'. Young christian workers and groups of catholic undergraduates were encouraged to consider themselves as lonely apostles; 'God and oneself is a majority'. There was usually a weekly meeting with a like-minded chaplain, who smiled tolerantly at occasional heresy as the concomitant of enthusiasm. Though it was pleasant to see a bishop now and again from a respectful distance, one met very few parochial clergy, let alone the bishop. It was accepted that this was a thoroughly normal and healthy situation, doubtless welcomed by the bishops as much as by the groups.

The fruits of this 'christianization of the milieu' by apostolic laymen first appeared in the trades unions, where in the 'fifties a most impressive group of catholic leaders emerged; where now are their successors, and who is now putting forward a coherent christian rationale on such issues as the Upper Clyde shipyards closure? Ten years later its influence had spread to the political scene; an ex-YCW leader held an important ministry in the last government. But where are the up-and-coming St John Stevases and Shirley Williamses? There is a similar situation in the public media of jour-

nalism and TV, where a surprising number of committed catholics of middle age hold responsible positions, but where there are few signs of younger apostles.

I myself was one of a group of undergraduates in the Union of Catholic Students who are now comfortably ensconced in middle-class middle age. As representatives of the first post-war catholic graduates, and of the first really extensive generation of catholic professional men and women, their names appear prominently (some might say tediously) in the catholic press. Amongst them are fairly exalted civil servants; a few have become liberal priests; one or two are eminent physicians and psychiatrists. Organizations like the Laity Commission, The Catholic Marriage Advisory Council and the Newman have drawn strength from them. But most of us have ended in higher education; having been active in the universities as undergraduates at a time when committed catholic dons were rarer than black swans, we made the university our vocation, with the result that there is a much more effective catholic presence amongst university teachers today.

Twenty years on we have lost the happy mobility of youth and the idealism of enforced poverty, and plushy middle-class life makes it hard to continue in the role of lonely apostles taking on the world. So it is that many of us have turned our beady eyes on the organized structures of the Church. (It goes without saying that no sane person under thirty-five can have any passionate involvement in these institutional aspects of the christian life.) Heaven knows there is a variety of ways in which such lay participation can be fruitful, and this will be the theme of the second part of this paper. It might even be claimed that as long as so many local structures remain antediluvian, the Church in Britain lacks the credibility to beget authentic apostles amongst the new generation. Personally I doubt this. What is needed is a more whole-hearted resumption of the phrase 'christian vocation' as a universal clarion-call (in this diocese at any rate we are having anguished appeals for 'vocations' as though the word were restricted to the religious life *simpliciter*; and this cast of mind, which stresses the separateness of the vocation to the priesthood, may itself be unwittingly accentuating the crisis). It is time we stopped this contemplation of our ecclesiastical navel as a full-time occupation. If we work towards improvement in the ecclesiastical structures, our primary aim should be precisely the emergence of more dynamic christian witness in committed individuals – first and foremost in our working milieu, secondly in our family life,

thirdly in the various forms of the apostolate (whether involvement in national or local government or presence in aid-your-neighbour activities), and finally in the ecclesiastical estates of parish and diocese.

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It is otiose here to labour the point that the parish is the obvious unit within which to recreate the christian community, that the clergy must inevitably take the initiative in involving the laity in the life of the parish, and that the parish-council is specifically recommended in the conciliar documents as the means of achieving this. There is virtually nothing that the layman can do here without the initiative of the pastor. *Verb. sap.*; living as I do in a parish where the pastor will have such a council only 'over his dead body', I have no competence to speak – we wait like Rip van Winkle to be roused and told that the Church is alive. It would be otiose, too, to stress that the diocese likewise can comply with the spirit and intention of the council only by creating from clergy and laity a representative body of consultation – not merely to obtain information from, but also to offer advice to, the bishop on diocesan policies in education, regional ecumenism, and so on. This is common knowledge, and where such structures do not yet exist it is not ignorance, but a failure of energy, or nerve, or faith, which is responsible.

Within the framework of the parish, the layman is inevitably and rightly cast in the role of subordinate worker to the priest, the full-time director. But between the levels of parish and diocese our conurbations provide scope for concerted activity, and it is precisely here, where no clerical dominion or demarcation exists, that the emancipated laity might be given greater freedom of action. It is in these larger units like Birmingham, London and Glasgow that the renewal groups emerged after Vatican II. In part they have grown out of university chaplaincies and Newman branches, but this is historical accident. The fact is that the parish in the larger conurbation is often irrelevant as a social unit, for catholics tend to group according to their professional activities and social strata.

It goes without saying that the renewal groups tend to be in bad odour with diocesan officialdom at the present time. Inevitably they attract argumentative individuals who consider it a sacred duty to cock superfluous snooks at bishops and monsignori, and who would succeed in disrupting a meeting of the cherubim and seraphim. But a large number of those who support these groups are intelligent

and committed, and it is distressing to see how all too often this commitment is discounted and suspected by diocesan officials. The Glasgow group, for example, has had extraordinary success in its public meetings. It has attracted men of the stature of Rahner and Mackenzie to Scotland. It has made a real attempt to discuss such thorny problems as abortion in a dignified and objective way. It attracts to its meetings hundreds of middle-of-the-road priests, nuns and laity who are delighted at this opportunity to demonstrate their eagerness to be seen as thinking catholics of the larger catholic world.

These groups are open to criticism because of their obsessive preoccupation with problems of authority, and particularly with the issue of *Humanae Vitae*. These issues will continue to be with us, and it is right that discussion on them should continue. But there are a good few other things in heaven and earth than are apparently dreamt of in the philosophy of some of these groups; it is possible to live a full christian life without bowing daily towards the Pill or indeed towards the Pope. Yet the point surely is that this obsession tends to choke out other possible flowerings in the cold climate of diocesan disapproval. A more constructive and tolerant approach from the Ordinary towards such lay-aspirations would surely have a moderating effect.

Here it may be useful to chart an experiment at the city-level which has been taking place in Edinburgh in the years since Vatican II (though an era in it has just come depressingly to an end). When cardinal Gray returned from the council full of enthusiasm for renewal, he encouraged the formation in the city of a Laity Centre, and allowed it the use of a large house owned by the archdiocese. This was to be a centre of education in the larger sense, a centre from where the catholics of the city and of the archdiocese might be encouraged to inform themselves and invigorate themselves as christians in the spirit of the council decrees. The centre was run by a committee of lay officers, but with both lay and clerical members (including the vicar-general of the archdiocese). Sunday conferences and week-night discussions were arranged on a wide variety of religious and secular topics, directed precisely at the four general areas of apostolic activity – work, family, ecclesiastical structures, social responsibility. There was a strong ecumenical flavour to the centre; christians of other denominations were involved in its organization and its meetings. A special sub-group of teachers and Catholic Marriage Guidance members mounted a

two-day course every month for school-leavers of fifteen, consisting of discussions on work and leisure, sex and responsibility, companionship and marriage. Frequent meetings were held to encourage the formation of parish-councils, and to discuss patterns of organization and activity. Attempts were made to further the establishment of similar centres in other parts of the diocese. Much of this work could have been done at parish-level by dynamic priests, or by an imaginative order of nuns; but nothing of the kind existed, and perhaps the most striking feature of the centre was that forty or fifty lay-people were regularly involved in keeping the centre spruce and solvent, and in organizing its activities.

Inevitably the Laity Centre had its critics and its opponents amongst the diocesan clergy, but occasional discussions with the priests helped to reduce the prejudices. Criticisms were inevitably levelled at the choice of topics and the titles chosen. Some of the priests who criticized them seemed to have a vision of diocesan catholics totally innocent and totally unsophisticated. So when Fr Jock Dalrymple, for example, promised a talk entitled 'Hope in God and despair in the Church', some parishes refused to exhibit the poster as advertising a seditious lecture. Inevitably the centre had to trim its sails to some extent to avoid arousing the kind of opposition which would have brought official pressures to bear. But this weakness was also a part of its strength; it could count on the support of a large number of the diocesan priests, who encouraged their parishioners to frequent the meetings.

This work continued to develop until 1970, when the lay-committee was officially dissolved by the archbishop, and a priest-director appointed instead. This was not a simple case of autocratic action. The work of running the centre was demanding, and needed a warden, but the money available was so small that no long-term appointment could be made. There was a large turnover of committee members, usually for excellent reasons of professional demands, family responsibilities, activity in the parochial structures. There was a real danger that the centre would founder through lack of organizational stability.

The sad thing is, however, that the principle of lay-management has been abandoned, and the Laity Centre is now a direct responsibility of the archdiocese. One immediate result has been that a large number of the lay-workers have drifted away. Several of these are busy people in close touch with various aspects of secular life in the city, who were attracted by the recognition that the diocesan

laity should be given an official role in the work of the diocese. A second obvious result is that the flavour of the meetings is changing; there is no longer that element of flexibility in discussion and in choice of topics which was possible for an 'unofficial' organ of the Church. The Laity Centre has become another parish, if a parish of a different kind.

All the same, the experiment at Edinburgh might have its value for some imaginative bishop who wants to direct the energies of 'renewal'-type catholics into more positive channels. It might have the best prospect of success in a city where parish-councils are in existence but find they have insufficient work to do. It is not just a question of allowing the laity scope for activity; the clerics with vision have to act as midwives, teasing out the apostolic potential latent in their flocks. There is a better prospect of progress, therefore, if there is a mixed team of lay people and clerics (always provided that the clerics chosen have a firm commitment to the notion of lay-responsibility). Indeed, there is nothing intrinsically hostile to the ideal if a priest-director were mooted, provided always that he was approved by the lay-committee.

The programme which such a centre might set for itself has already been outlined. First, the need to stress that one's job, with the ramifications surrounding it, deserves one's primary allegiance of time and effort. There is a host of possible lines of approach here. Our programmes for school-leavers are a possible foundation; from these discussions on work and leisure, one might develop small groups of young people to discuss problems of industry, the trades unions, and local working conditions; here the expertise of YCW officials could be sought (the YCW publicity is not what it used to be, and it is a pity that its recent revival is not better known). We also tried specialized meetings for professional groups. We were particularly successful with the nursing profession, partly because of the pressures on them of recent social legislation. But there is such a host of problems affecting individual professions on the one hand and the Church on the other (in the field of education, for example, there is the crisis in catechetics, not to mention the bigger problems of comprehensive education) that the possibilities for action are legion.

So too in the second area for action, the christianization of the family. Where one or other of the various family movements already exists, the promotion of discussion on the problems faced by parents would serve to strengthen it. A lot could be done in co-operation

with the Catholic Marriage Advisory Council – meetings for engaged couples, discussions for the newly married, lectures on the various difficulties which young children bring with them.

Thirdly, the improvement of ecclesiastical structures. If a centre began by cross-fertilizing parish councils, it might eventually become a key-point for a diocesan pastoral council. Then there are the various organizations which require a radical rethinking of their point in local situations. The Catholic Truth Society, for example – does the pamphlet still matter? Is anything being done to encourage the diffusion of christian truths on local radio or television?

Fourthly, the social apostolate. Clearly a basic aim here is to encourage more catholics to take an active part in the non-denominational societies which exist to assist people in need – whether they are housing associations, or adoption societies, or helpers of alcoholics, or people who cope with individuals in distress. In practice it is prodigiously difficult to attract audiences to 'do-gooding' meetings, but there are various ways in which this facet of christian living can be kept before the eyes of people who attend the centre.

Fifth and finally, ecumenical activity. A sense of realism is important here; a Laity Centre would never hope to arrogate to itself the work of a diocesan ecumenical commission. What it can do is to create a meeting-place where non-catholic christians are always welcome and expected, whatever the matter under discussion. Some of our most solid support has come from students at the local episcopalian college. The point of ecumenical meetings at this level is to prepare the ground for that gradual movement towards unity now being undertaken by the theologians. That movement towards unity can only be successful if we envisage our entire apostolate – work, family, parish, larger social concern – as a vocation shared by all our fellow-christians.