

## Vocations to the Lay Apostolate

It may as well be said at once that every Catholic has a vocation to be a lay apostle. The terms are unfortunate in being those big, abstract words that seem essential to all discourse about anything serious in this age of jargon: but what do these words mean? Every Catholic, from the moment of his confirmation, (if not before) becomes, by God's grace, a lay apostle. There is no such thing as being a practicing Catholic and *not* being a lay apostle, to some extent. And further, what does it mean to be a lay apostle? How much can it mean? Everything: the notion rises as high as sanctity, but its starting point is the minimum requirement of Catholic life. Anyone who ever said a prayer, offered up the smallest sacrifice for anybody else, was, at that moment, a lay apostle.

Therefore a discourse on "Vocations to the lay apostolate" will necessarily sound pretty much like a discourse on being a good Catholic. And a better word for "good Catholic" is saint, a term which some people are apparently scared of, out of a totally false delicacy. Is it any more presumptuous to want to be a saint than to want to be a good Catholic? Is it any more difficult to desire? And anything we desire, in this realm, we can have, if we pray for it patiently and humbly. And since this is so, is there any other conclusion to be drawn except that the only reason why we aren't all saints is that most of us never tried to be, never even thought of asking to be.

Everybody who was ever confirmed has been certainly called to the lay apostolate, and actually, so have all the others too, in a less definite and forceful sense: but they are all called to this work.

However to make this classification of "lay Apostle" as broad as this, is to make it a little vague, and it will not be comprehensible

until we narrow it down at least to those who are conscious of the responsibility that has come upon them. They have taken up their crosses already, without knowing it: but they are obscurely aware that something has been imposed upon them, and they begin to seek, with a kind of inner craving, to find out what it may be.

Some of them find that they have vocations to the priesthood, then. They are luckier than the rest of us. For them, from now on, everything is definite, is settled for them, they will have much guidance. And as for us? We are still restlessly trying to find out what it is we are called upon to do. We go to mass, go hungrily to the sacraments, and we pray when we can, and we read things that feed our love of God, and we read the lives of people who have loved Him before us. Sometimes we work out some sort of a private religious life for ourselves, with daily Mass, a rosary, or stations of the Cross sometime during the day. Perhaps we attempt some mental prayer, some meditation, every day at a set time. We develop this secret life, because we have to, we need it terribly, we want much more than this. What is there for us?

The men and women who do all these things, or things like them, who pray, or devote themselves no little to others, or love to study books of philosophy or speculate about religious questions, sing religious music, anything, are all of them ready to be made conscious of the meaning of their "lay apostolate," which they have already, without knowing it, been led to begin. Because the lay apostolate is nothing more than the life of one who desires to see God, and wants to know Him. Secretly, they are always saying, in their prayers: "Show me what I am to do." "Tell me what You want of me." "How do I follow you? What does that mean?"

How can the general words of Christ be reduced to fit our particular cases? The answer will be quite different for each one of us, and it will amount to our doing no more than what we can do, but to do that as well as we possibly can. And how does a Christian do anything well? By giving himself over to the direction of God's infinite will, for only God fulfills and perfects all things, and we ourselves have no strength of our own to turn anything to any real use. The best we can do with our own resources, is to exploit material values, which, however, are not real values. And the values we are called upon to perfect are the moral values in our own personality and in the persons of all we live with.

To have a "lay vocation" means to be impelled, by an insatiable desire to see God, to do acts by which are realised the infinite values that God has implanted in our souls, our personalities. It means to desire not only to become more real and more perfect ourselves, but to help all those around us to realise themselves in good acts and good lives. This, so far, is the same as the priestly vocation, from which it is only distinguished by the fact that this vocation does not involve leaving the world in any special sense (although a lay person can take a vow of chastity or of poverty or of obedience too, there is nothing to stop him); on the contrary, the lay apostle is one who lives outwardly the same life as all the other laymen, no matter how different his life may be, in secret, from theirs. He is subject to all their insecurities, all their worries, and all their ordinary temptations, and he has none of the advantages that a priest has, spiritually. If he wants to lead a religious life, he has to make time for it, and carry it on in the thick of the world's commotions: and no one will grant him any concessions for it. He had best keep most of it secret, or be called not a saint but an idiot. (It is much better to be called an idiot.)

The idea of what a "lay vocation" can mean is now getting a little more precise, and it is time to make an important distinction, which arises here as well as in religious vocations: the distinction between the active and the contemplative life. In lay vocations also, the contemplative is the better vocation ("*Maria meliorem partem elegit*") but also the rarer. However, there is no purely contemplative "lay vocation," since the layman remains in the world, and such a thing is impossible. His vocation is strictly tied up with all the confusion of a heterogeneous human community. All Christian vocations are to some extent social: even the hermits in the Thebaid had their disciples. The presence of two persons is essential to the virtue of charity. But the lay contemplative vocation is social in the widest sense, almost as wide a sense as the active lay vocation is. The lay vocation necessarily means apostolate, communication, and the one advantage it has over the priesthood is that the layman reaches places in the darkness of our chaotic society where a priest could never penetrate.

The lay apostle has to teach, but it is well to point out that the most effective and the most fundamental way to teach the Christian way of life (because that is what we are to preach: "Christ crucified") is by example rather than by word. Words are essential, but example comes first.

There are no doubt hundreds of enthusiastic Catholics (but not enough even of these) who keep going the interminable arguments about religion that enliven gatherings of men everywhere, always to less purpose than one would think. These arguments are certainly valuable in strengthening the convictions of those who propound them: but the other arguers are much sooner impressed by the example of a person like Catherine de Hueck than by any polite argument handed out by someone in whom they recognise their own colorless and rather unavailing way of life.

Both the contemplative and the active vocation will, then, have a common basis: they will consist in a strong desire to see God, and they will manifest themselves in acts before words: these persons go about, now, so absorbed in their work of pleasing God by the sanctification of themselves and by works to help sanctify others, that, without knowing it, they have kindled a "light which so shines before men that they glorify Our Father Who is in Heaven."

The distinction between the active and contemplative vocation is laid down by the individual's own talents, his abilities, what he already knows how to do, his skills, the way of life, perhaps, which he already follows.

For the great majority of Catholic laymen, the lay vocation means continuing to live whatever life they live, provided it is the exercise of some honest skill, and not something that involves continual sharp-practise at the expense of rivals (as too many businesses do) but in continuing their way of life, these people devote themselves to God, following the familiar lines of Catholic Action laid down in the Encyclicals of Pius XI. The Catholic who lives by some skill he can be proud of, who is a real craftsman, a real producer of good things and not some kind of a drudge connected with a machine or an office, a unit in a money making organisation, that Catholic is a rare man, and one of unusual good fortune, because he possesses a talent which he can devote entirely to God.

Most of us have jobs which can only be offered up to God as a kind of penance. For us it is necessary to divide our lives between the purgatory of our servile work and the things we really want to do. Like the people of the world who run from the office to their various methods of deadening all thought of the office, we too go now to some other occupation, and try, in it, to make up for not having served God the rest of the day. We teach a little Catechism. We go out street-

speaking perhaps. Or perhaps we only make some kind of compromise between serving God and amusing ourselves: we organise dances and basketball games in the Parish Hall. It all has something more or less remote to do with the lay apostolate, and the active lay apostolate.

What the active lay vocation means in its full sense is now being made clear to many Catholics by the work and influence of Catherine de Hueck, for example, and those who have offered themselves to share the life of voluntary poverty and works of mercy at the Friendship Houses of Harlem and the slums of Toronto. For these workers, the lay apostolate is based on an elementary form of community life, centered upon daily mass and communion, living together in poverty, working together, and reciting compline together in the evening. The whole of the life is work, and there is only a minimum of prayer attached to it, because Baroness de Hueck deliberately and jealously guards her communities from becoming in any way unlaicised, and turning into communities of religious sisters and brothers, instead of plain lay-people. This communal aspect that can be taken by the active lay vocation, together with the fact that social work hastens to submit itself to the control of local parish priests and their bishop, brings up problems which the contemplative lay apostle need not fear: problems of organisational conflicts, and disappointments that they bring with them, which all add to the trials of this kind of life. Each type of lay vocation naturally involves its own difficulties which the zealous servant of God not only expects but even welcomes, so strong is his desire to please Christ in all the opportunities he sends them, of work or of trials.

As opposed to the active lay apostolate, the contemplative lay vocation is exemplified quite clearly by a man like Jacques Maritain, and even more clearly by the life of the man who in his lifetime converted Maritain: Leon Bloy.

Leon Bloy, too little known in this continent, is one of the most interesting figures in French literature of the turn of the century and the time of the First War.

He was fortunate in having a real skill he could devote to God, Whom he served all his life, in poverty, with an impassioned and apocalyptic eloquence. Now that Bloy is dead, the many Journals and letters into which he poured most of his intense creative effort, show clearly to any one who sees the man's whole life in perspective, how his vocation worked itself out, and how the Providence of God was

using Leon Bloy for the salvation of sad, Godless men and the prophetic laceration of materialistic and lukewarm Catholics in France and everywhere else.

Bloy's vocation as a lay apostle was founded on one principal source of inspiration: the Apparition of the Blessed Virgin at La Salette, in which were made certain prophecies, since most horribly fulfilled (like the Fall of France), accompanied by the most clear and unequivocal warnings that were, Bloy always contended, suppressed by interested persons. In any case, even those parts of the warnings of La Salette which all the world knew were significant and important enough in themselves, and Bloy starts out from them to repeat over and over again his accusations against those Catholics who had forgotten the Doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ, and had come to live as if the Church were synonymous and coextensive with the Middle Class, and the ideals of Christian Charity were only another, less clear way of expressing the virtues of commercialism. Bloy's life was a life of great poverty and suffering, a suffering increased, for him, by the fact that it had to be shared by his wife and children. His whole career was a long succession of malevolent attacks by not only those of the Catholic bourgeoisie who took offense at his indictment of their pious self-indulgences, but those of the radical and atheistic groups which he criticised with even less mercy.

Yet Bloy refused to write anything but what he knew; he had to write about what he believed. He consistently turned down opportunities of money-making assignments in order to write journals and pamphlets which always somehow found a publisher but never made any money. Curiously, though, his writings always seemed to fall into the hands of those who most needed them, and Bloy led into the church many remarkable souls, not the least of them being Jacques and Raissa Maritain.

Bloy, again, and his whole family, based their whole lives on daily communion at a time when, in spite of the fact that the Popes were trying to get this practise universally accepted, it was still looked at askance by inexplicable prejudice on the part not only of laypeople but even certain of the clergy. Bloy's life was one of poverty and of begging and of writing for God and not for money. It also included a considerable amount of prayer and meditation. Perhaps Bloy even read the Divine Office, or the Little Office, anyway, each day. In any case, speaking of the lay vocation, in this more contemplative sense,



he hopes for a time when there will be many laymen who will offer up all their prayers and works without exception to the Mother of Sorrows for the souls in Purgatory and for the conversion of sinners, and who will, among other things, read the Divine Office from day to day.

The function of the contemplative lay vocation of Catholics is twofold: besides the fact that this Catholic must also first of all be, by his devoted service of God in prayers and merciful works, a light shining before men, his actual teaching will take one of two directions, and perhaps both. On one hand, it will tend to teach and edify those who have no idea what Christianity is really all about; on the other hand it will clarify Christian ideas for Christians themselves who also are always in need of edification and mental stimulation.

The work done by two good philosophers, like Maritain and Gilson—men who are read and respected by non-Catholic philosophers perhaps even more than they are appreciated by ordinary educated Catholics (who nevertheless could learn much from them)—is an example of valuable and far reaching Catholic Action. This applies also to the work and art criticism of Eric Gill, to the historical studies of Christopher Dawson, to the novels of Graham Greene (to a minor extent), which all are especially good kinds of Catholic Action because they reach out beyond the boundaries of Catholicism and spread Christian ideas where our conventional writers and the thinkers more popular within our ranks cannot make them reach: that is, among the intellectuals outside. We too, inside the limits of what is too often merely a Catholicism in the cultural sense, would do well to study at least our best philosophers.

Hundreds of other examples of this type of lay vocation can be named, including great numbers who had nothing to write or nothing to teach in big speeches: yet consider Louis Martin, who was a most saintly man, and will certainly someday be canonised, who lived a holy retired life himself, which he entirely devoted to shaping the souls of his daughters to an even more perfect love of God than his own. He was the father of St. Therese of Lisieux whose own "little way" to sanctity forms a perfect and simple and intelligible foundation for the life of any lay apostle, since its essence is the perfection of spiritual childhood, of humility, that consists in submitting every part of our life entirely to God, and thereafter refusing Him nothing, not even the *smallest* sacrifice we can give Him: and none is too small to please Him.

The world today can only be saved by saints, and every one of us should be praying daily to God to give us an army of them to help us. Jacques Maritain has said, somewhere, where he thinks these saints will appear: first, in the strict contemplative orders, but second, and perhaps more important, among the poorest of the laity: in other words, in the slums, in the concentration camps, on the forced labour gangs, in the bomb shelters, in the Harlems of our "civilization." And when they do come it will be because there were Catherine de Huecks and Leon Bloys among them, and it will be because of the prayers of Trappists and Poor Clares, not excluding the unnoticed, but not to be despised, prayers and works of those countless priests and laymen whose unhappy privilege it is to be members of the vast and unheroic and profoundly mediocre middle class.