

Rome Stoops to Conquer Chapter II.

Catholic Action



Continued from [Rome Stoops to Conquer](#), by E. Boyd Barrett.

CATHOLIC Action is best described as the new phase of Catholicism. There was always something kindred to it in the Catholic Church, but it is only in recent times that it has become an instrument of social power which obtrudes itself daily on the notice of the public. In America it is a force that has to be reckoned with; a force that is applied here, there and everywhere. It does not always succeed, nor is it always wisely applied, but no thoughtful American can deny its startling significance.

In theory, Catholic Action is the work and service of lay Catholics in the cause of religion, under the guidance of the bishops. In practice it is the Catholic group fighting their way to control America. In this fight they are far from disregarding the noble cause of humanitarianism. Catholics can point to as many constructive works of charity as any other religious group. But the motif latent in Catholic Action is not pure humanitarianism. It is a sterner and more practical purpose.

In medieval times the Church gained supremacy in various countries through her influence over nobles and soldiers. Today she aims at the old supremacy by mass action of her organized subjects, and by systematic penetration of various groupings. Writing of the need of trained propagandists in the "apostolate of industry," the present Pope states: "Undoubtedly the first and immediate apostle of the working men must themselves be working men, while the apostles of the industrial and commercial world should themselves be employers and merchants. It is your chief duty, Venerable Brethren, and that of your clergy to seek diligently, to select prudently, and train fittingly these lay apostles amongst working men and employers."

Though Catholic laymen as such have no jurisdiction in the Church, they are today the chief agents in the work and development of the Church. They are ready and willing to help the great cause. Priests and bishops mingle with them, guiding and advising them, and taking the lead openly when important issues are at stake. But the heavy work, the spade work, is done by the laity, men and women, to whom "the Catholic Cause" appeals.

There was a time—it is now past—when only pious Catholics took part in the work of the Church. But today many Catholics who cannot qualify as pious are busy about Catholic Action. Catholicism, in America at least, has ceased to be a matter of religious observance. Catholicism now is something that partakes of clannishness, and that is constituted in large part by social and

political and "club" affiliations. Among the hundreds of Catholic leaders who are outstanding for their loyalty to the cause are to be found quite a few who have little if any regard for Catholic doctrines or observances. Catholic Action would be a far less serious factor in this country were its only agents pious and devout Catholics. The starting point of the wave of Catholic Action in this country may be traced back to the inauguration of the National Catholic Welfare Conference in 1921. On that occasion Archbishop Hanna declared: "We have co-ordinated and united the Catholic power of this country. It now knows where and when to act and is encouraged by the consciousness of its unity. We feel ourselves powerful because our reunion has become visible." From that day Catholic strength has grown apace, and Catholic organizations have multiplied.

In no country of the world is there such thoroughgoing organization as among American Catholics. Every class, every cross section of sex, occupation, age and local affiliation is appropriately grouped. From "hello-girls" to dentists, from poets to policemen, Catholics are billeted in their societies and taught to be "Catholic-conscious." There are clubs or guilds or confraternities of Catholic lawyers, nurses, writers, army officers, naval officers, customs officers, stenographers, factory girls, and so forth. Some societies are nationwide, like the Holy Name, with 2,000,000 members; the Knights of Columbus, with 500,000; the Sacred Heart League; the National Council of Catholic Men; the National Council of Catholic Women; and the Catholic Daughters of America, to mention but a few.

New organizations spring into existence every month. Only last May (1935) a "Catholic War Veterans Association" was established under the patronage of Bishop Molloy of Brooklyn. Already it has several "posts" and it aims at becoming not only a nation-wide but an international organization. Women auxiliaries are attached to the "posts" under the snappy name of "Yeomanettes." "I am sure," announced the chaplain, Father Higgins, "that we will have the holy backing of Cardinal Hayes and that the entire hierarchy will likewise approve." Contemporaneously with the Catholic War Veterans, the Catholic College Graduates felt inspired to do more than they were doing for Catholic Action and to set up a new organization, so that their leadership in Catholic life might become more effective. Father Parsons S. J., explaining the new move, writes: "After all the big trends are the result of big men and big influences, and we must not blame the graduate if he himself feels that the tremendous forces that are within him as a result of his Catholic culture have not been released for the benefit of his country and our civilization. ... Organize! Pool the intellects and the wills of as many of the graduates as can be got together. Give them a common objective. Fire their imaginations with the vision of a great movement which takes its roots from deep within the traditions that formed our Western civilization. *Let them be daring. Let them be even revolutionary if the need be for that,*" (italics ours).

The rank and file of Catholics realize very clearly the power that comes from union, and the importance of organization. As an example of Catholic insight into the value of standing together, I quote from the remarks made at a Bronx Holy Name meeting by one of the officers. "Catholic men," he said, "should unite in order to be able to tell legislatures that they must not introduce

bills which are inimical to the ideals of the family or the ideals of the Catholic Church. They should organize so as to be strong enough to insist that school teachers who teach 'pernicious doctrines' be removed."

The words "strength," "power," "organization" are an ever-present refrain in addresses delivered at Catholic society meetings. Speakers harp on these words and stir up in their hearers a sense of solidarity and a fighting spirit. According to Cardinal Hayes, it is "praiseworthy and important" for Catholics "to portray the majesty, the dignity, the power and the growth of Catholic life." To err on the side of modesty in such a matter is less a virtue than a sin.

"We must have great numbers, but they must be intelligent numbers," said District Attorney William F. X. Geoghan at a Knights of Columbus rally in Brooklyn. "It should be realized that with an increase in numbers we shall greatly increase our strength and power for good ... We should bear in mind that in the future we may wish to seek State Aid for our Catholic educational system."

The scope of Catholic Action is so immense and varied that it is quite impossible to deal comprehensively with it in one chapter. It reaches out into every field, from literature to athletics, from interpreting Catholic liturgy to picketing consulates, from training Girl Scouts to heckling Communists. It opposes here; it supports there. It is constructive and destructive; it recompenses and it punishes; it fills mailbags and closes theaters. In later chapters we shall deal with some of its largest manifestations, in reference to. Mexico, Birth Control, Neo-Paganism, and other matters. Here we shall deal mainly with its tendencies and characteristics.

As an example of the wide scope of a Catholic society devoted to Catholic Action, we may take the work done by the Catholic Daughters of America for the year 1933-34. During the year the members of the "courts" of this society subscribed \$925,124 for educational and "benevolent" activities. Of this sum \$20,000 went to Rome for "welfare work"; \$21,000, for Catholic Church Extension; and \$25,000 to the Knights of Columbus. During the ten years 1924-1934, almost \$5,000,000 was subscribed by the Daughters for these and other like objects.

During the year in question, one hundred of the Daughters entered convents; others worked (in 45 states) in Convert Leagues; Social Study Clubs; Catholic Press, Welfare, and Legislation Committees, and other such activities. Thousands of members devote their time to organizing retreats; giving catechetical instruction; and teaching in religious vacation schools. It was considered by the Supreme Directorate that the annual report demonstrated *"the unlimited resourcefulness and marvelous courage of the personnel of the C. D. of A."*

Catholic Action is busy, all over the country, about libraries, Catholic colleges, Newman Clubs, vocations, public morals, politics of course, and every form of human activity. "A Catholic bookshelf in the public library is the way Catholics of Dubuque, Iowa, have solved the problem of the

dissemination of Catholic literature," writes a correspondent to *America*. Elsewhere the same problem is solved by the surreptitious removal of anti-Catholic books and the demand on the part of Catholics for pro-Catholic books which forces the hands of librarians. When colleges need funds to extend, a meeting of laymen is arranged and a drive for funds is organized. The more prominent Catholic laymen are "selected" by the local Church authorities to lead the drive. Thus, recently, when Seyton Hall, South Orange, needed a new gymnasium (to cost \$250,000), one hundred and fifty laymen were "selected" to collect the money. More nuns are required and a group of Catholic ladies open a recruiting office in the Bronx called "The Little Flower Mission Circle" and ship four hundred girls to convents within nine years. At Malvern, Long Island, the Board of Education decided, with reason, that Newman Clubs in public high schools were against the state law and forbade them. The pastor, Father Burke, and a local politician, Major Murray, took up the challenge. Father Burke made the extraordinary claim that Newman Clubs are not "under the auspices of the Catholic Church" and the matter became a political issue in the local elections. Meanwhile Father A. J. Owen, a Jesuit, writes to *America* (a Jesuit publication) urging Catholics to interfere in the affairs of public schools even though they do not (and of course should not) send their children to them. He finds fault with Catholics for neglecting to watch over the morals and religious interests of non-Catholic children. "This neglect on the part of Catholics in many communities has allowed subversive elements to control schools and has naturally led to abuses which are daily becoming more evident. Such abuses will continue until every Catholic realizes his right and duty to concern himself with the educational system his taxes indirectly and directly support. *The exercise of this right and the fulfillment of this obligation clearly come within the scope of positive Catholic Action.*"

This brings us to the burning topic of Catholic claims and Catholic Action in the field of Education.

Catholics lose no opportunity of denouncing State schools as godless and demoralizing. They insist that there should be religious education given to all. "Education without God," they say, "is Education without Education." They point out that "God is written into the Constitution" and that it is unconstitutional and un-American to exclude the teaching of God's word and the inculcation of divine worship in schools paid for by the citizens. It is to this point of view that Father Owen refers in his letter given above. Another prominent Catholic, Professor F. X. Polo, states the position thus: "An adequate method of bringing the necessary knowledge of God to American youth is the core of the question of including the teaching of religion in the curriculum of our splendid public school system. It would be an astounding anomaly and a disastrous tragedy in the life cycle of America if we raised up at public expense a youth entirely ignorant of the God who is written very definitely into our fundamental law as the Creator and Author of the laws of Nature and the Source of our inalienable rights."

I dwell on this Catholic policy of "interfering" in the curriculum of public schools in order to contrast it with the definite stand against any interference whatsoever on the part of the State or the public with the

curriculum of their own Catholic schools.

The Church has always opposed the setting up of a Federal Department of Education lest it might give Federal authorities the right to meddle with parochial schools or colleges. When Mussolini declared to the Pope that the State was supreme in education and that in this matter he was "intractable," the Pope (giving a lead to Catholic bishops the world over) replied: "We can never agree to anything that restricts or denies the right given by God to the Church and the family in the field of education. On this point we are not merely intractable, we are uncompromising."

In order to have complete control of the education of Catholic children, the Church in America had Catholic schools and colleges built, at Catholic expense, and of course with the sole object of accommodating Catholics. The State did not interfere, beyond pointing out that it could not constitutionally support such private sectarian schools with public moneys. To do that would be to endow a particular religious faith and to nullify both the letter and the spirit of the Constitution.

In time, as Catholics grew bolder, they began to make claims against the State, saying: "We educate 2,500,000 American children and save the State \$265,000,000 yearly. In the meantime we pay taxes to support the Public Schools which our children do not attend. This is unfair. We are doubly taxed. The State should aid our schools." Writes Michael Williams": "Catholics do call attention to the fact that *in justice they have the right* to compensation for the expense involved in setting up their own schools and in giving education in citizenship," (*italics ours*).

In other words, the Church demands that she have the exclusive right to decide when and where and how to erect schools (without any reference whatsoever to taxpayers) and that the taxpayer should be compelled to foot the bill. What in essence she demands is the imposition on non-Catholic citizens of the odious injustice of "taxation without representation."

Is the Church serious about this claim? The answer is to be found in the recent effort made in the Ohio Legislature to have the Davis School Aid Bill passed. This bill was designed to give "emergency aid" to the amount of about \$2,000,000 to the Catholic parochial schools of Ohio. For two years the Catholics have prepared for the fight in the House of Representatives. In the elections they secured pledges from nearly fifty members to support the bill. In the Senate the Davis Bill passed, 17 votes for and 15 against. However, it was blocked in the House of Representatives, 86 against and 42 for. Says the *Catholic News*: "Bigotry and fear of political consequences combined to deny the Parochial Schools the temporary aid which they sought from the State." Catholics attributed the defeat of what they considered a perfectly just and constitutional bill to the venom and hatred of their enemies. They lauded a Protestant, Mr. H. H. Root, for printing and circulating at his own expense 75,000 postcards that were used in flooding the mailbags of members of the Houses, in favor of the measure.

A bill which was no less unconstitutional, though less serious in scope, the Kelly-Corbett Transportation Bill, designed to give Catholic schoolchildren

the right to use public school busses in going to school, passed both Houses in Albany recently but was vetoed by Governor Lehman to the immense annoyance and disappointment of New York Catholics. Had it received the Governor's signature and become a state law, Catholic Action would have won its first skirmish against the "tolerance" provisions of the Constitution.

Needless to say the Catholic fight for state aid for parochial schools is only in its first phase. Every year, from now on, we shall see the fight renewed until victory is achieved.

Catholic Action is essentially optimistic, bold, and at times reckless. Nowhere is there a braver or more hopeful spirit than among American Catholics. They feel or proclaim they feel on the upgrade. "All is well" all the time with them. Among them critics and doubting Thomases are few and inarticulate. On his seventy-seventh birthday, which he celebrated recently, Mgr. Lavelle of St. Patrick's told reporters: "There has never been a period in our recollection when Catholics were more devoted to their duties and their Holy Faith." Catholics are marching into battle today with cheery songs on their lips. They pay little heed to the few croakers who mourn the "terrible leakages" in their ranks. Their *esprit de corps* is excellent.

Their boldness in planning is exceptional. Gigantic undertakings are faced without faltering. "We Catholics," writes John Wiltbye, "undertake the most impossible things, and in the current patois, we generally get away with them." Schemes that other organizations would shrink from undertaking are commonplace among Catholics. As an example we may take the March (1935) "Drive for Action" of the Knights of Columbus. This "mobilization" was planned to embrace the United States and Canada, and the two countries were divided up into twenty-six areas. Each area was placed in charge of a distinguished layman, a general, judge, senator, corporation president, ex-mayor or ex-governor. The purpose of the drive was manifold, embracing the chief items of nation-wide Catholic Action, and an increase of membership for the order itself. The mobilization headquarters was located in the Empire State Building, of which the Chairman of the Board, Mr. A. E. Smith, is a leading Knight. The Supreme Knight, Martin H. Carmody, put before the organization the purpose of raising the membership from 500,000 to 1,000,000, and added: "*The campaign is not simply for the purpose of getting new members for the Order but to supply a greater and stronger co-operation between the laity and the heads of the diocese and parish.*"

His Holiness, through Cardinal Pacelli, wrote a long letter expressing "high approbation" of the Knights and keen interest in their work: "It is my earnest hope and fervent prayer that this laudable endeavor to enroll the Catholic manhood of North America in the ranks of the Knights of Columbus may be a brilliant success. . . . The need is great: the present challenges to Catholic Action."

In the first week of the "drive" about 10,000 new members were enrolled, which was claimed as a record: "the largest number of new members to join an organization in so short a period in the history of fraternal movements" (Supreme Knight Carmody). Apropos of the drive, Mr. Michael F. Walsh, State Deputy of New York, speaking in the Columbus Club, Brooklyn (April 1), is

reported in the Press thus: "When I appeal to you for increased membership, I hasten to explain that we are not anxious to bring within our ranks a mob thirsty for destruction. If we can attract other men into our organization we will have accomplished Catholic Action."

What is noteworthy about such Catholic enterprises is the speed with which "the call" is spread among Catholics in every corner of the country, and the enthusiasm with which Catholic journals, Catholic broadcasting stations and Catholic pulpits lend support in disseminating suitable propaganda.

We turn now to some characteristics of Catholic Action and consider it first under its punitive or retaliatory aspect. When Catholic sensibilities are "outraged" vengeance in some appropriate form is taken. When remarks made in Mexico by Ambassador Daniels were considered by Catholics here to be laudatory of the Calles regime, he was promptly denounced and a clamor for his recall was raised. Alderman Deutsch was brought to book by Catholics on a like charge. He did not see eye to eye with them about Mexico and he was chastened for it. Dr. Charles L. Fama, of New York City, was appointed to a public office by Mayor LaGuardia and it was recalled by Catholics that in times past he had "attacked" the Catholics. The Mayor was called upon to oust him from office. Alderman Hart, as Catholic spokesman, declared: "There is no room in this country for intolerance; there is no room on the payroll of this city for a bigot." Meanwhile the Board of Estimates withholds Dr. Fama's salary!

The Protestant Defense League tried to interest Senator Borah in investigating "religious persecution in New York" as a preliminary to the investigation of "religious persecution in Mexico" but the Senator declined to act. He is reported as telling the League that the investigation would be a "delicate" matter! The Press of New York displayed little inclination either to take up the cause of Dr. Fama or to back the demand of the Protestant League. What Heywood Broun wrote a few years back is still apparently true: *"Every New York editor lives in terror of the Catholic group."*

Those who have had the misfortune to deliver lectures or to publish articles critical of some phase of Catholicism have experienced in abundance the punitive character of Catholic Action—shoals of abusive letters, the majority of which are anonymous—offensive remarks over the telephone—cancellation of business deals—and threats of various kinds. No other religious group in America displays so sensitive a concern about "the honor" of its creed as does the Catholic. "Catholics," wrote Mr. H. L. Mencken, "take criticism very badly." He might have said that they do not take it at all; they refuse to take it and hurl it back at the critic's head.

The well-known sensitivity of Catholics to anything that even remotely seems to reflect on their religion brings about ludicrous situations at times. One of these situations is described in a paragraph of the New Yorker entitled "Vegetables." The story has to do with a sister magazine, Vogue, belonging to the Condé Nast organization. It happened that *Vogue* purchased from Anton Bruehl a picture of a crib made out of vegetables. It was an interesting and quite inoffensive piece of art but a member of the Condé Nast staff expressed

horror at the implied irreverence and warned that there would be Catholic reactions if the picture were published. She, as a pious Catholic, considered it a sacrilege to build a crib out of vegetables instead of ordinary bits of straw and wood. Some of the Condé Nast people sided with her; more thought her view absurd. Back of the concern over the issue was the latent fear of Catholic Action. As a compromise it was decided to consult Catholic ecclesiastical dignitaries on the matter. These accomplished theologians examined the picture carefully and gave it their imprimatur. Also they admitted frankly that only in the United States could such a question and such a situation have arisen.

Sensitivity to the Church's honor, which flourishes in ignorant Catholics as well as in educated Catholics, *makes it a perilous matter to give a lecture, however fair and impartial, on a Catholic subject* unless one be a priest or a well-known Catholic. An incident will serve to illustrate the point. The present writer, in a public lecture, stated that professed fathers of the Society of Jesus took solemn vows in accordance with their Constitutions. He was at once interrupted by a militant Catholic who declared that it was a lie to say that the Jesuit Order had Constitutions. He added, which was not in question at the time, that he had known Jesuits all his life and that they were all saintly men. It was utterly useless to point out that the *fact* that there were Jesuit Constitutions was not derogatory to the Order and that the fact could be verified by visiting any important library and inspecting a copy of the said Constitutions of the Society of Jesus. The interrupter, according to the accepted practice of Catholic Actionists involved in a public argument, held his ground in holy contempt of facts.

In her book *My Fight for Birth Control*, Margaret Sanger gives a comparatively recent example of the sinister in Catholic Action. It happened in connection with the raid on her Clinical Research Bureau on March 23, 1929. The police who searched her offices carried away confidential medical case records. When her lawyer protested to the magistrate that such records were "privileged," he ordered them to be restored. When they were returned 150 case records were still missing and Mrs. Sanger never succeeded in recovering them. Whose records were they?

Soon Mrs. Sanger found out that the missing case records were those of Catholic women who had visited the clinic. Some of them came to tell her that "they had received mysterious and anonymous telephone calls telling them that if they continued to go to the clinic their cases would be exposed in the newspapers." Mrs. Sanger maintains that the raid was engineered by "high Church authorities" for the very purpose that was accomplished, namely, of frightening off from it Catholic clients under threat of publicity. Mrs. Mary Sullivan, policewoman, was the Catholic hero of the fray.

Catholic Action is usually, but not always, unanimously endorsed by Catholics. Once in a while a dissenting minority is vocal among them. This is the case in the Catholic opposition to the Child Labor Amendment. Mgr. John A. Ryan, The Catholic Worker of New York, and a few individual Catholics like Frank P. Walsh support the measure but their influence is inconsiderable against that of Cardinal O'Connell, the dean of the hierarchy, Archbishop Glennon of St. Louis, and the other bishops.

The Catholic case against the amendment is that if it were adopted the authority of Catholic parents over their children would be imperiled. Father Corrigan, representing Cardinal O'Connell, gave evidence against the amendment at a legislative hearing in Boston and said that "if the Amendment became effective Washington authorities could decide whether a child should receive training in the religious faith of his parents." The Catholic Press in general denounced the Amendment as "a practically irrevocable provision granting unlimited power over the youth of the country to Congress." In New York it is recognized that the defeat of the Amendment was due "to the combined forces of manufacturers and many Catholic leaders, political and clerical."

This opposition to a measure which appeals to the enlightened sentiment of the American people is an example of the narrow selfishness of Catholic Action. No matter how great the benefit of the Amendment to the people at large, the possibility of its endangering the Church's influence under some utterly unlikely contingency, suffices to make Catholics oppose it.

In summing up the meaning and significance of Catholic Action in America it would be unfair and ungenerous not to acknowledge the fine citizenship and noble humanity of millions of Catholics who help support Catholic hospitals and charitable institutions; Catholic vacation schools, where 250,000 supplement their education; Catholic rural life bureaus and organizations; Catholic Boy and Girl Scout movements; and a thousand and one other undertakings of Catholic Action that improve the well-being of American citizens.

On the other hand, it is impossible not to see that Catholic Action as a whole is directed to the end of changing America, root and branch, into another people and another culture.

It goes on here, there, everywhere; restless and entirely irresistible; a potent and subtle force shaping anew our national destiny. Yet there is no one, as it seems, capable of appraising its significance and dramatizing its meaning for the understanding of the people.

Myopic political observers who smoke thoughtful cigarettes in editorial watchtowers wax excited over symptoms of passing political currents in the Middle West, but have neither the vision to see nor the art to interpret the most momentous thing that is happening today. Even the depression itself, great as are the effects that it has produced, and great as will be, in all likelihood, its further effects, is a matter of less consequence to the destiny of America than is the ever-deepening surge of Catholic Action.

Continued in [Chapter III. Winning The Worker](#)

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