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The Lay apostolate - its need today

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*An address of His Holiness Pope Pius XII to
the World Congress of the Lay Apostolate
October 14, 1951*



NATIONAL CATHOLIC WELFARE CONFERENCE

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ITS NEED TODAY***

**ADDRESS OF POPE PIUS XII
TO THE WORLD CONGRESS OF THE
LAY APOSTOLATE**

October 14, 1951



National Catholic Welfare Conference

1312 MASSACHUSETTS AVE., N. W.

WASHINGTON 5, D. C.

An English translation of the address given by His Holiness Pope Pius XII to members of the World Congress of the Lay Apostolate when he received them in audience on October 14, 1951. A prayer personally composed by His Holiness for lay apostles and said in union with him during the audience appears on page 12. Present at the Congress were national officers and staff members of the National Council of Catholic Men and the National Council of Catholic Women.

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THE LAY APOSTOLATE — ITS NEED TODAY

1. What consolation and what joy overflows Our heart at the sight of this imposing assembly, where We see you gathered together before Our eyes, you Our venerable brothers in the Episcopate, and you also, dear sons and daughters, come together from all continents and regions to the center of the Church, to celebrate here this World Congress of the Lay Apostolate.

2. You have studied its nature and object. You have considered its present state. You have meditated on the important duties which are incumbent upon it in view of the future. These have been for you days of constant prayer, of serious examination of conscience, of exchanges of views and experiences. To conclude all this, you have come to renew the expression of your faith, of your devotion and of your fidelity to the Vicar of Jesus Christ, and to beg Him to make fruitful by His blessing your resolutions and activity.

3. Frequently, indeed, in the course of Our pontificate, We have spoken of this apostolate of the laity under the most diverse circumstances and varied aspects—in Our messages to all the faithful, or in addressing Ourselves to Catholic Action, to Marian congregations, to workers and teachers, both male and female, to doctors and jurists, to women's organizations and to other groups—always stressing their present-day duties, even in public life. These were for Us so many opportunities to treat, either incidentally or expressly, of questions which this week have found their well-defined place on your agenda.

4. This time, in the present of so distinguished and numerous a group of priests and faithful, all most justly conscious of their responsibility in or toward this apostolate, We would wish, in a very brief word, to define its place and its role today in the light of the past history of the Church. It has never been absent from it. It will be interesting and instructive to follow the development of this apostolate in the course of times past.

5. It is often said that during the past four centuries the Church has been exclusively "clerical" as a reaction against the crisis, which in the 16th century had tried to achieve

the abolition, pure and simple, of the hierarchy. In this regard it is insinuated that it is time for the Church to enlarge its framework.

6. Such a judgment is so far from the reality that it is precisely since the sacred Council of Trent that the laity has taken rank and progressed in apostolic activity. The thing is easily noted. It here suffices to recall two patent historic facts from among so many others; the Marian congregations of men actively exercising the apostolate of the laity in all the domains of public life and the progressive introduction of women in the modern apostolate.

7. It is fitting, on this point, to recall two outstanding figures of Catholic history: one is Mary Ward, that incomparable woman whom, in the most somber and bloody times, Catholic England gave to the Church; the other, St. Vincent de Paul, unquestionably in the first rank among the founders and promoters of the works of Catholic charity.

8. Nor can one let pass unnoticed or without recognition its beneficent influence that close union which, until the French Revolution, marked the mutual relations, in the Catholic world, of the two divinely established authorities: the Church and the State. The intimacy of their relations on the common ground of public life generally created an atmosphere of Christian spirit, which rendered largely unnecessary that delicate work which priest and laity must undertake today in order to safeguard the faith and assure its practical value.

9. At the end of the 18th century, a new factor came into play. On the one hand the Constitution of the United States of America—a country which had an extraordinarily rapid development and where the Church soon began to grow considerably in life and vigor—and on the other hand the French Revolution with its consequences in Europe as well as overseas led to the detachment of the Church from the State. Without taking effect everywhere at the same time and in the same degree, this separation everywhere had for its logical conclusion: leaving the Church to assure by her own means freedom of action, accomplishment of her mission and defense of her rights and liberty.

10. This was the origin of what is called the Catholic movements which, under the direction of priests and the

laity and strong in their compact units and sincere loyalty, led the large mass of believers on to combat and to victory. Do we not see here already an initiation and introduction of the laity into the apostolate?

11. On this solemn occasion it is a sweet duty for Us to address a word of gratitude to all, priests and faithful, men and women, who are engaged in these movements for the cause of God and the Church and whose names deserve to be mentioned everywhere with honor.

12. They worked hard and fought, uniting as best they could their scattered efforts. The times were not yet ripe for a congress such as the one you have just held. How, then, have they matured in the course of this half century? You know the answer well. Following a swifter and swifter rhythm, the cleavage which long had separated spirits and hearts into two parties, for or against God. Church and religion, was enlarged and deepened. It established, perhaps not everywhere with equal clarity, a line of division in the very heart of peoples and families.

13. There is, it is true, a confused number of tepid, irresolute and wavering souls, for whom perhaps religion still means something, but only something vague, without any influence in their lives. This amorphous mass may, as experience teaches, find itself constrained unexpectedly, one day or another to take a decision.

14. As far as the Church is concerned, she has a threefold mission to fulfill for all: to raise up the fervent believers to the level of present day needs; to introduce those who hesitate on the threshold to the warm and salutary intimacy of the hearth and to lead back those who have separated themselves from religion and whom she cannot abandon to their miserable fate.

15. An inspiring task for the Church! But it is one rendered more difficult by the fact that, while the Church as a whole has grown greatly, the number of clergy has not increased in proportion. Besides, the clergy must above all keep themselves free for the exercise of the sacred ministry proper to the sacerdotal state, which no one else can do for them.

16. For that reason, assistance rendered by the laity to the apostolate is an indispensable necessity. The experience of

those who were comrades in arms, in captivity, or in other trials of war bears testimony that this support is truly valuable. Especially in matters of religion there is evidence of the profound and efficacious influence of those who are companions in a profession or condition of life. These factors, and others besides, according to the circumstances of places and persons, have opened wider the doors for the collaboration of the laity in the apostolate of the Church.

17. The great numbers of suggestions and experiences exchanged in the course of your congress, besides what We have said on the occasions already mentioned, makes it unnecessary for Us to enter into more detail regarding the present-day apostolate of the laity. We shall content Ourselves, therefore, with giving a few considerations which can throw a little more light on one or other of the problems that present themselves.

18. (1) All the faithful, without exception, are members of the Mystical Body of Christ. It follows that the law of nature, and still more pressing, the law of Christ, imposes upon them the obligation of giving a good example by a truly Christian life: "For we are the fragrance of Christ for God, alike as regards those who are saved and those who are lost" (2 *Cor.* 2, 15). Today, all are more and more concerned in their prayer and sacrifice not only about their own private needs, but also about the great intentions of the reign of God in the world according to the spirit of the Our Father, which Jesus Christ Himself has taught us.

19. Can we say that everyone is called to the Apostolate in the strict sense of the word? God has not given to everyone either the possibility or the aptitude. One can hardly ask a wife and mother, who has to look after the Christian upbringing of her children and has to work at home besides to help her husband feed their little ones, to do apostolic work of this kind. The vocation to be an apostle is, therefore, not addressed to all alike.

20. It is certainly not easy to draw an exact line of demarcation showing precisely where the true apostolate of the laity begins. Should it include, for example, the education given by the mother of a family, or by the men and women teachers engaged with holy zeal in the practice of their profession? Or the conduct of a reputable and openly

Catholic doctor whose conscience never wavers when there is question of the natural and divine law and who fights with all his might in defense of the Christian dignity of married persons and the sacred rights of their offspring? Should it include even the action of the Catholic statesman who sponsors a generous housing policy in favor of the less fortunate?

21. Many would be inclined to answer in the negative, seeing in all these examples merely the accomplishment, very laudable in itself but obligatory, of the duties of one's state.

22. We recognize, however, the powerful and irreplaceable value, for the good of souls, of this ordinary performance of the duties of one's state by so many millions of conscientious and exemplary faithful.

23. The apostolate of the laity, in its proper sense, is without doubt to a large extent organized in Catholic Action and in other forms of apostolic activity approved by the Church; but, apart from these, there can be and actually are, lay apostles, those men and women who see all the good to be done and the possibilities and means of doing it; and they do it with only one desire: the winning of souls to truth and grace.

24. We also have in mind so many excellent lay people in countries where the Church is being persecuted today as she was in the first centuries of Christianity, who are doing their best, at the peril of their very lives, to fill the place of imprisoned priests, by teaching Christian doctrine and instructing others in the religious way of life and in true Catholic thought, and by encouraging the frequentation of the Sacraments and devotional practices, especially devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. All these lay people, you see see them at work; do not concern yourself to ask to which organization they belong; but rather admire and heartily recognize the good they accomplish.

25. It is far from Our thoughts to belittle organization or to underestimate its value as a factor in the apostolate. On the contrary, We hold it in the highest esteem, especially in a world in which the adversaries of the Church descend upon Her with all the compact mass of their organizations. But it must not lead to mean exclusivism, to what the

apostle called "explorare libertatem": "to spy upon our liberty" (*Gal.* 2, 4). Within the framework of your organization, allow great latitude for each member to develop his personal qualities and gifts in all that can conduce to doing good and to edification (*Rom.* 15, 2), and rejoice when you see others, outside your ranks, who "led by the spirit of God" (*Gal.* 5, 18) win their brethren to Christ.

* * *

The Clergy and the Laity in the Apostolate

26. (2) It is self-evident that the apostolate of the laity is subordinated to the ecclesiastical hierarchy; for the hierarchy is of divine institution. The apostolate, then, cannot be independent with regard to it. To think otherwise would be to undermine the very wall on which Christ Himself has built His Church.

27. Granted this, it would still be erroneous to believe that, within the confines of the diocese, the traditional structure and present form of the Church places the lay apostolate in an essential parallel with the hierarchical apostolate, in such a manner than even the Bishop himself could not make the parish apostolate of the laity subject to the pastor. This the Bishop can do; and he can establish the rule that the works of the lay apostolate which are destined for the good of the parish itself should be under the pastor's authority. The Bishop has constituted the pastor shepherd of the whole parish, and as such he is responsible for the salvation of all his sheep.

28. On the other hand, there may exist works of the lay apostolate which are extra-parochial or even extra-diocesan—We should, rather, say supra-parochial and supra-diocesan—according as the common good of the Church demands. That is equally true and it is not necessary to repeat it.

29. In Our allocution of last May 3 to Italian Catholic Action, We made it clear that the dependence of the lay apostolate with respect to the hierarchy admits of gradations. Such dependence is strictest for Catholic Action,

for Catholic Action, indeed, represents the official lay apostolate, it is an instrument in the hands of the hierarchy. It must be, as it were, a prolongation of its arm; it is, by that very fact, essentially subject to the direction of the ecclesiastical superior. Other works of the lay apostolate, organized or not, may be left more to their free initiative, with all the latitude required by the ends to be attained. It is self-evident, however, that the initiative of the laity in the exercise of the apostolate must always remain within the bounds of orthodoxy and not oppose the lawful prescriptions of the competent ecclesiastical authorities.

30. In comparing the lay apostle, or more precisely the layman of Catholic Action, to an instrument in the hands of the hierarchy, according to the expression which has become current, We understand the comparison in this sense: namely, that the ecclesiastical superiors use him in the manner in which the Creator and Lord uses rational creatures as instruments, as second causes, "disposing (of them) with great favor" (*Wisd.* 12, 18). Let them use those instruments, then, with a consciousness of their grave responsibility; let them encourage them, suggesting enterprises to them and welcoming with good will the enterprises which they suggest, approving them in broadmindedness according to their opportuneness. In decisive battles, it is often at the front that the most useful initiatives arise. The history of the Church offers us sufficiently numerous examples of this.

31. In a general way, in apostolic work it is to be desired that the most cordial relations reign between priests and laity. The apostolate of the one is not in competition with that of the other. Indeed, to tell the truth, the expression "emancipation of the laity" which is heard here and there is hardly pleasing to Us. It has rather an unpleasant sound; it is, moreover, historically inexact. Were they children or minors, did they have to await their emancipation, those great "trail blazers" to whom We referred when speaking of the Catholic movement of the past 150 years? Moreover, in the kingdom of grace all are regarded as adults. And it is that which counts.

32. The appeal for the help of the laity is not due to the failure or frustration of the clergy in the face of their

present task. That there are individual failures is the inevitable result of the wretchedness of human nature, and they are found here and there. But, generally speaking, the priest has as good a sight as the layman to discern the signs of the times, and his ear is not less sensitive to hear the human heart. The layman is called to the apostolate as the collaborator of the priest—often a most precious, even necessary collaborator, because of the shortage of clergy, too few, as We have said, to be able to complete their mission unaided.

33. (3) We cannot conclude, beloved sons and daughters, without recalling the practical work which the lay apostolate has accomplished and is accomplishing throughout the whole world in all the domains of individual and social human life; a work the results and experience of which you have compared and discussed among yourselves during these days; the apostolate at the service of Christian marriage, the family, the child, education and the school; for young men and young women; an apostolate of charity and aid under the numberless aspects it assumes today; an apostolate for practical betterment of social disorders and misery; an apostolate of the missions, or for emigrants and immigrants; an apostolate in the field of intellectual and cultural life; an apostolate of games and sports; finally, and it is not the least of these, the apostolate of public opinion.

34. We recommend and We praise your efforts and your work, and above all the vigor of the good will and apostolic zeal which inspires you and which you have spontaneously manifested during the Congress itself, and which, like abundant springs of life-giving waters, have made its deliberations fertile.

35. We congratulate you on your resistance to that noxious tendency which exists even among Catholics and which would like to confine the Church to those questions said to be “purely religious”—not that pains are taken to know exactly what is meant by that phrase: provided the Church keeps to the sanctuary and the sacristy, and slothfully lets humanity struggle outdoors in its distress and needs, no more is asked of her.

36. It is only too true; in certain countries the Church

is constrained thus to cloister herself. Even in this case, within the four walls of the temple, she must still do, as best she can, the little that remains possible for her. She does not withdraw spontaneously or voluntarily.

37. Necessarily and continually, human life—both private and social—finds itself in contact with the law and spirit of Christ. Consequently, by force of circumstances, there arises reciprocal compenetration between the religious apostolate and political action. “Political,” in the highest sense of the word, means nothing else but collaboration for the good of the state. But this “good of the state” is to be understood in a very wide sense. Consequently it is on the political level that there are debated and enacted laws of the greatest import, such as those concerning marriage, the family, the child, the school, to confine Ourselves to these examples. Are these not questions which primarily interest religion? Can they leave an apostle indifferent, apathetic?

38. We have traced, in the allocution already cited (May 3, 1951), the boundary between Catholic Action and political action. Catholic Action must not become a litigant in party politics. But, as We have already said to the members of the Olivaint Conference, “to the extent that it is praiseworthy to remain above contingent quarrels which poison the struggles of parties . . . to that same extent would it be blameworthy to leave the field free to persons unworthy or incapable of directing the affairs of State.” (Disc. March 28, 1948).

39. Up to what point can and should the apostle keep himself at a distance from this limit? It is difficult to formulate an uniform rule for all on this point. The circumstance and the mentality are not the same everywhere.

40. We receive your resolutions with pleasure. They express your firm good will to extend your hand, one to the other, beyond national frontiers, in order to achieve in practice a full and efficacious collaboration in universal charity. If there is a power in the world capable of overthrowing the petty barriers of prejudices and of partisan spirit, and to dispose souls for a frank reconciliation and for a fraternal union among peoples, it is, indeed, the Catholic Church. You can rejoice in it with pride. It is for you to contribute to it with all your strength.

41. Could We give to your Congress a better conclusion than in repeating to you the admirable words of the Apostle of the Nations: "In conclusion, brethren, rejoice, be perfected, be comforted, be of the same mind, be at peace and the God of peace and love will be with you." (2 Cor. 13, 11). And then the Apostle ends: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the charity of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." (2 Cor. 13, 13). It expresses all that which your action seeks to carry to men. May this gift fill also your own hearts and souls.

42. Let this be Our final wish! May God deign to hear it and pour out upon you and the whole Catholic world, His best graces. In testimony of this We impart to you, with all Our heart, Our Apostolic Benediction.

Prayer for Lay Apostles

"Oh Lord, Jesus, Who hast called us to the honor of making our humble contribution to the work of the hierarchical apostolate, Thou Who hast asked of the Heavenly Father not to remove us from the world but to preserve us from evil (John 17, 15), grant us an abundance of Thy light and Thy grace that we may crush in ourselves the spirit of darkness and sin, so that, aware of our duty, persevering in good, and inflamed by zeal for Thy cause, by the power of example, prayers, action and supernatural life we may make ourselves every day more worthy of our holy mission, more capable of establishing and promoting among men, who are brothers, Thy kingdom of justice, peace and love."—Pius XII

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