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THE CATHOLIC HOUR

LET'S WORK WITH THE GANGS

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In many American cities nowadays there is a good deal of talking and writing about boy gangs or street clubs and their doings. Unfortunately much of this talking and writing tends to take one of two extreme forms. At one moment because of an act or series of acts of lawlessness committed by some gangs we are told that gang boys are a thoroughly bad lot, that pretty much all of them carry guns or knives and that the gangs should be ruthlessly suppressed. The Police and the Juvenile Court are called upon in almost hysterical terms to do something and do it quickly. That is one view and at the present time there are many examples of it. The other view is just the opposite. Its proponents insist that there is nothing to get excited about, that there always have been gangs of boys of different national and racial backgrounds, that they always have and always will indulge in a certain amount of fighting and that there is not much to be done about it as long as the Police are reasonably alert and there are enough boys' clubs and other recreational facilities available. The truth lies somewhere between these two extremes.

At the outset let's be clear on one point. The overwhelming majority of gangs even in slum areas are not as groups carrying on activities characterized by lawlessness and violence. Of course that statement does not mean that one or even two or three members of a gang may not be in trouble or at least have been in trouble any more than a statement that some adult club is a respectable and sound organization would exclude the possibility of an embezzler or forger being discovered among the membership. But the fact remains that the gang as such is not anti-social although conditions over which its members have no control may make it such. A painstaking census recently made in one of our largest cities disclosed sixty-six anti-social gangs among more than one thousand five hundred. Unfortunately the bad gang has a news value which the good gang seldom possesses.

On the other hand it is quite true that in certain areas of our cities an increasing number of gangs are carrying on anti-social activities which have in some cases resulted in death and in some cases in injuries more or less serious. It is true that these

particular gangs are armed with home-made revolvers and guns, knives and improvised brass knuckles and more recently, because of our carelessness in permitting the entry of souvenir revolvers, with these latter weapons. It is also true that instances can be cited in which boy leadership has resulted in a degree of organized and planned gang warfare different from that to which we have been accustomed in the past. And finally it is to be noted that again in certain areas of our cities it is relatively easy for a good gang to change into a bad gang.

What are the reasons for this growing tendency of the gang to be swung out of its more normal pattern into anti-social lines? They are of course numerous and some of them we have known for many years. Slum conditions and the caricature of the home in the material sense which the slum usually affords are to be put in the forefront. Certain other reasons, however, are of more immediate importance.

In the first place should be mentioned the mobility of population characteristic of our cities. So-called "areas of first settlement," areas in which rents are the lowest and living

conditions the poorest, in particular, have seen wave after wave of persons of different racial or national backgrounds arrive and eventually depart. Such movements of population in their transition phases cannot fail to produce hostility and conflict and in this hostility and conflict youngsters as well as adults have been involved.

More recently the effects of this mobility of population have been heightened by the racial and religious tensions which presumably are the backwash of Hitlerism as well as a breakdown in our democracy. As a result movements of population, essentially economic in their origin and causation, have become invested in the minds of many of the people affected with a racial and even religious significance. This significance has been effectively passed on by fathers and mothers and other adults to members of gangs.

The War inevitably glorified violence. It also inaugurated new methods of fighting known as commando tactics for the benefit of the organized military forces and for the forces of resistance in enemy occupied countries. Manuals of these tactics copiously illustrated, not to mention newspaper and magazine ar-

ticles, brought this type of fighting to the attention of a large public, including youngsters, and gang warfare has been affected.

And last but by no means least we should not forget that a feeling of frustration is fairly common among teen agers at the present time. They find themselves in a grim and thoroughly disorganized world; they were stirred to prepare themselves for service in the armed forces and the war ended before this now pent-up emotional drive could find suitable expression, and during the war years those of an age to work became accustomed to high wages and employment opportunities which for them and for their successors no longer exist.

There is one common factor which runs through the causes which I have suggested are at the root of the increase of anti-social activities on the part of the gang. There is not one of them over which the youngsters themselves have any control—not one for the origin of which they can be held responsible—personally or collectively. That is a fact over which we should do a good deal of pondering.

There are surely few men who if they will take time off to recall their boyhood days will fail

to discover some sort of gang to which they belonged, some group that went together regularly, that had a name and a hang-out, a pass-word or a secret code perhaps and some sort of a constitution. In a word, the gang is a perfectly natural, normal boy phenomenon. Indeed it is more than that. In the words of the recent Report of the Committee on Gangs or Street Clubs of the Welfare Council of New York City:

“By its very nature the gang has constructive potentialities. It is a medium through which the adolescent not only can gain a security which arises from acceptance by one’s social group, but also through which capacities for group loyalties, leadership and community responsibility can be developed.”

In dealing with the gang we have followed two principal methods. When it has gotten out of hand or at least showed signs of getting out of hand we have had recourse to forcible methods of suppression. These methods have not worked. The gang suppressed on one street corner today revives minus a few members perhaps and with a new name next week in a probably less desirable meeting place and, what is more ominous for the

future, it revives with a strong determination to get even with those responsible for the effort at suppression. A quite different answer has been sought through recreation and leisure time agencies and that answer too has proved inadequate for the simple reason that the kind of boy we are talking about says that he isn't interested in programs concerning which he hasn't been consulted, that he dislikes rules he hasn't helped to make and he makes unfavorable comparisons between his hang-out and any building, however fine, which he says isn't his. At any rate recent studies have shown that only a small percentage of the total adolescent age group are participating in adult sponsored leisure time activities at the present time.

Clearly a new and experimental approach to the gang problem is required. The Committee On Gangs of the Welfare Council of New York has recommended in its recent report the immediate setting up of three year experimental projects in two areas of the city in which there has been serious gang conflict. Those projects have three essential elements:

1. Recognition and acceptance of the gang.

2. Adult influence exerted indirectly through carefully chosen persons capable of winning the confidence of the gang and working with its members.

3. Efforts to enlist the active interest and support of the communities from which the gangs come, first of all in behalf of the immediate needs of the boys and eventually in meeting community problems of which the anti-social gang is but one manifestation.

The emphasis in these projects will be on getting the right sort of personnel—the kind of man who can sit in a corner for three hours while fourteen boys are arguing over the by-laws of their gang and only throw in a question every now and again to draw attention to some need or convey some suggestion. The projects will have no fixed program and will be housed in no building.

A project incorporating the features recommended for New York has been in successful operation for several years in Washington, D. C. It is known as The Junior Police and Citizens Corps and its founder and director is a young Negro Police Officer, Oliver A. Cowan. The Corps started when Officer Cowan was given an especially

troublesome beat and found himself confronted with widespread destructive gang activity. Instead of making wholesale arrests he got to know the gangs and he cultivated their leaders. Before long he had won their confidence and their cooperation. He secured better meeting places for each gang and with the assistance of store keepers and other persons in this particular area of the city he was able to get athletic equipment and recreational and other facilities. The community soon got the idea that these were their boys and that instead of condemning them or doing nothing about them they had better do something to help them and the boys in due course got a very similar idea: the idea, as one boy put it, that "this is our part of town and

we're going to do something for it." They have. Street lamps are no longer smashed, store windows are intact, alleys are being cleaned up, an open air canteen has been built for the summer months on a vacant lot from which an unsightly collection of junk has been removed and a frame house has been acquired as headquarters and is being renovated partly by the boys themselves and partly as a project of the manual arts department of a nearby public school.

That is an example of what can be done with gangs and it suggests a slogan which is the essence of a program:

Let's do far less *to* gangs and far more *with* them and *with* the communities from which they come.

THE CATHOLIC HOUR

1930—Seventeenth Year—1946

The nationwide Catholic Hour was inaugurated on March 2, 1930, by the National Council of Catholic Men in cooperation with the National Broadcasting Company and its associated stations. Radio facilities are provided by NBC and the stations associated with it; the program is arranged and produced by NCCM.

The Catholic Hour was begun on a network of 22 stations, and now carries its message of Catholic truth on each Sunday of the year through a number of stations varying from 90 to 110, situated in 40 states, the District of Columbia, and Hawaii. Consisting usually of an address, mainly expository, by one or another of America's leading Catholic preachers—though sometimes of talks by laymen, sometimes of dramatizations—and of sacred music provided by a volunteer choir, the Catholic Hour has distinguished itself as one of the most popular and extensive religious broadcasts in the world. An average of 100,000 audience letters a year, about twenty per cent of which come from listeners of other faiths, gives some indication of its popularity and influence.

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