

CATHOLIC ACTION: THE HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE CREATION OF THE ORGANIZED LAITY

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Abstract

The centuries–old model of the Church as a community of lay people and clerics who inspire and guide them was entering a functional crisis. In the era of revolutions and liberalism, the laity found itself in a new, contradictory position: at the same time, they are believers loyal to the Church and citizens loyal to secular society. Looking for a way out of the crisis, the Church relied on the democratic capacity of the laity, who promoted Christian values with their social presence, but also fought for the Church’s political rights. The organized Catholic laity had a specific role: to form, culturally and morally, the lay classes. The prehistory of the creation of the Catholic lay movement (Catholic Action) gives insights into the complexity of societies in the second half of the 19th, and the beginning of the 20th century, but also the high level of inventiveness of both the laity and the hierarchy in activating the laity, which will turn out to be an epoch–making success of the Church of the 20th century.

KEYWORDS: lay movement, Catholic Action, liberal society, secularism, Papacy, revolution

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Introduction

Organized Catholic laity or the Catholic lay movement are relatively recent phenomena. They gradually took shape in the second half of the 19th century, reaching the peak of their relevance, both ecclesiastical and social, in the second quarter of the 20th century. Like most Catholic undertakings, in principle, it refers to the scope of the Catholic world, but its activity bears the characteristics of a dominantly European phenomenon. More specifically, it occurs in a part of European countries, mainly Western and Central Europe. The important exception was Italy.

In the above-mentioned time interval, the Catholic lay movement revealed its existence to the Catholic world, but also to the non-Catholic world, causing surprise in both camps. The theologian Yves Congar jokingly remarked: “Today it is the case...that the clergy need to be defined in relation to the laity.” (Lauret 1988, 65). For a long time, the understanding of lay people was contrary to this statement; they were defined by what they are not. The laity is not clergy, as Congar indicated them in the same conversation as “negative creatures”. Ecclesiastical deliberations of the 20th century, especially those connected with the dynamics of the council’s thoughts, will place the laity, or better to say, return it to the position of “standard Christians”, or, to borrow the colloquial term, of “default Christian” (Muldoon 2009, 241).

The mentioned time span of the creation and intensive activity of the organized laity corresponds to the era of the birth and formation of contemporary Europe. Completion of the *long* 19th century and the first decade of the *short* 20th century is the scene of the formation and rise of national empires and at the same time their decline or transformation towards supranational global entities. What was the position of the hierarchical Church in these processes? Did it exist on the edge of events or at least try to organize itself in this struggle for survival? The impression of the state of siege and the general retreat of the Church is noticeable among the contemporaries of that time. The widespread thesis about the crisis and decline of the Catholic position in the 19th century is summed up by Owen Chadwick’s conclusion: “Without meaning to end the Counter-Reformation, Napoleon overthrew the settlement inherited from the wars of religion and left a new Europe in which Protestants were politically far stronger than Catholics” (Chadwick 1981, 536).

From another point of view, there is the thesis that states: “There is a good reason to describe nineteenth-century Europe as an ‘Age of Catholic Revival’ and not as an ‘Age of Revolution’, ‘Age of Capital’ or ‘Age of Imperialism’”, as analyzed by Eric Hobsbawm (Hobsbawm 1987). As a consequence of constant aggressive attitudes towards the Catholic Church between 1789

and 1815, which seriously shook its activity and social role, European Catholicism in Europe after the Congress of Vienna in 1815 increasingly took shape as a tenacious populist and ultramontanist resistance to liberal and secular Europe (Heilbronner 2006, 236). Therefore, there is also the opinion that nineteenth-century Europe can be referred to as the “second confessional age” (Kretschmann 2003; Heilbronner 2006, 236). If the word revival is a dynamic expression of this attitude, the organized laity is certainly an important component of this “new confessionalization”.

1. *Prehistory of the laity in the tradition of Christianity*

“The clergy and the laity are the two modes of belonging to the Church. They form the people of God. They mutually identify and define each other and are intrinsically united that a theological study of each of them without the other is very difficult, if not impossible” (Osborne 1993, 20). Such a precise definition does not diminish the intensity of transformations in the internal structure of the Church from the apostolic times to the XIX–XX centuries. Transformations of this kind are sometimes the result of centuries-old theological, social, and cultural processes; sometimes they are the result of accelerated and strong changes in the social position of the Church, such as the one at the time of the Constantinian conversion. Until the French Revolution, the laity were imagined in a self-evident symbiosis with the whole body of the Church as its secular part, which follows the Church, and is guided by its clerical wing (Tabacco 2010). The concept of society understood as *Christianitas* found both laymen and clerics clear roles in the preservation and improvement of Christian society seen as a *locus* of salvation within which the Church performs its role as herald of the Gospel, guardian of truth and moral principles, but also of the Divine order embodied in a defined social structure, with a monarchy as a functional model (Muldoon 1999, 64–67).

New charisms within the universal Church history often appear through the testimony of the evangelical virtues of individuals driven by the imperative to renew the church. St. Francis of Assisi, the great medieval reformer, carried out his task of restoring the Church mainly as a layman. Towards the end of his life, he was ordained a deacon. Even as a layman, St. Ignatius fully developed the system of his ‘spiritual exercises’, the axis of Jesuit charisma; just to mention two well-known examples. Such “lay” undertakings are perceived as “self-explanatory” transitional forms towards the formation of religious (clerical) institutions, and thus hide the originality of the initiated ventures. These lay incentives were supported by many members of the clergy, both theologically and organizationally. Also, there was opposition from some clerics to their initiatives. However, most of the valuable

lay initiatives had a limited local character or were linked to some religious charism, such as the lay “third orders” of mendicant orders and similarly inspired social activities (Sensi 2008, 174–175; Terpstra 2000). Confraternities are examples of continuous activity that were irreplaceable at the local level, and their activity is constantly revealed in its complexity and church rootedness (Black 2004 130–148).

A comparative example of the wrong perception of the roles of laymen and clerics is some data from the time of the Reformations of the 16th century. It is taken as an unquestionable fact that the Protestant movement was the work of (protesting) laymen who wanted to restore the Church on the wave of dissatisfaction mostly, if not entirely, with the clerical wing of the Church. On the other hand, the Catholic renewal (counter-reformation) should be a completely clerical undertaking in which, in accordance with the matrix of division into lay reformation and clerical Catholic renewal, the laity were passive recipients of new disciplinary measures and spiritual initiatives. The fact is that the first generation of leading reformers of the Protestant direction came almost entirely from the ranks of the clergy, even monks: Luther, Zwingli, Bucer, Tyndale, van Essen, Hamilton, Cranmer, Vermigli, etc. Research shows that three-quarters of the first-generation reformers would come from clerical ranks (Foster 2007, 23). On the side of the Catholic renewal, members of the clergy are also numerous, but the decision to be ordained often came after an intense (and prolonged) time of their spiritual maturation and reform activity in the lay class. In addition to Ignatius Loyola, (ordained as a priest only at the age of 46), well-known protagonists of the Catholic renewal are Filip Neri (ordained at 36), Camillo de Lellis (ordained at 33), Cardinal Gasparo Contarini (cardinal at the age of 52, ordained as a priest at 54), Gaetano Thiene (ordained at the age of 37); high age at that time to start in any profession. Numerous protagonists of the Catholic renewal were non-ordained monks (John of God) or laywomen like Angela Merici, who, at the age of 61, founded the order of Ursulines.

2. *Political changes and the position of the Catholic Church*

In the said period of the creation of the organized Catholic laity, the scheme of the (ideal) Christian medieval universe was systematically eroded. Social processes and dominant ideas of era have already taken a clear theoretical design: democracy, individualism, secularism, liberalism, etc. The French Revolution and the events triggered by it robbed Church members of their centuries-old understanding of their role in society and placed the laity in a position of being believers loyal to the Church and citizens of an increasingly secular society. After the end of the Napoleonic wars, the Church invested a great effort in the restoration of institutions and social

positions, seeking a *modus vivendi* with secular power, often anti-Catholic in character and attitude (Cary 1996, 15). The most important task was the restoration of religiosity in broad layers of society, which lasted in successful continuity until the 1870s when a series of events dramatically changed the somewhat achieved balance. In a short time, previously marginal social and political issues come to the fore. On the map of Europe, the most noticeable imperative was the creation of nation-states. The Italian unification ended the sovereignty of the papal state, and the political position of the papacy was in a kind of political vacuum. Furthermore, the return of republicanism in France after the War of 1871 proved final, and Catholics sought a way to survive in a republican secular environment (Aubert 1990). From the early 1870s, the united German Empire deconstructed the Catholic tradition through the *Kulturkampf* policy, with the general support of “democratic” Prussian structures. The feeling of threat brought back memories of the 17th century and politically mobilized German Catholics along confessional lines, and in this way, the laity would become the centre of political resistance in a previously unfamiliar way (Cary 1996, 17; Sperbe 1984, 207–252; Anderson (2000 89–105).

Secularism was institutionalized in the constitutions and legislatures of many countries. The restructuring of the Habsburg monarchy into the Austro-Hungarian state union had brought changes; it was no longer primarily a Catholic monarchy, but a multinational community of heterogeneous national interests (Becker 1990). With strong anti-clerical regimes in Spain and Portugal, it seemed that the religious balance in Europe was overwhelmingly in favor of Protestantism as the more dominant political-religious conception (Maier 1993, 19). At the same time, the political pluralism of Catholics was strengthening, monarchism was no longer a guarantor of the safety of Catholics even in majority Catholic countries. Economic priorities were becoming increasingly dominant, and the distancing of broad sections of society from the Church, especially urban ones, was becoming increasingly obvious. In a short time, European Catholics were put before an often-unavoidable choice of priorities: the nation, political equality, economic justice, etc.

3. *Immediate reasons for the creation of the organized laity*

Nevertheless, the immediate reason and condition for the constancy and intensity of the development of Catholic action is the position in which the Catholic Church found itself, as a hierarchically organized social reality. The previously mentioned circumstances put the Church in a position incommensurable with earlier crises. The questionability of maintaining the Papal temporal power in the papal state, the loss of a kind of protected position of the Church in the European societies of that time, and the complete secu-

larism leads the Roman pontiffs of this time to reflect on new models of coexistence of the Church in contemporary society. Modern society was perceived as secular, and the activation of lay believers in society was the only unimpeded communication channel through which the Church could reach the citizens of such society.

The growing new social, economic, and value reality was opposed by the Church, both spontaneously and designedly, by reviving the gathering of forces around the centre; a process that was largely indicated by the concepts of Catholic integralism and ultramontanism.

Catholic integralism is a broad conceptual category that tries to classify a multitude of socio-religious conceptions that want to integrate political life and Catholic doctrine into one whole. Of the many definitions, perhaps the most precise is the one that holds that:

...rejecting the liberal separation of politics from concern with the end of human life, holds that political rule must order man to his final goal... Integralism holds that there are two powers that rule him: a temporal power and a spiritual power. And since man's temporal end is subordinated to his eternal end, the temporal power must be subordinated to the spiritual power (Waldstein 2016).

Based on this definition, the reaction of the 19th century Church as a response to the pressure and offensive of liberalism can be partially called integralism. However, the starting point was no longer the medieval complementarity of the state and the church, that is, the identification of the Church with the whole of organized society (Southern 1970). Now the starting point was the interpretation of Catholic social teaching, which advocated the principle that the Catholic faith should be the basis of public order within civil society which was enabled and supported by the Catholic majority (Van der Krogt 1992, 123–125; Aubert 1976, 383–407).

Ultramontanism is a Catholic reliance on Rome, not only as a consequence of valuing the papal service of leadership of the general Church, but also an increasingly strong one-sided connection with the papacy and the central institutions and traditions of the papacy in the dynamics of the life of the Church in the public, legal, and spiritual spheres (Von Arx 1998; Denzler 1982, 596–598). From the original concept of this term in the sense of the pope interfering in internal French church and state affairs, thus endangering the Gallican tradition or Jansenist elitism, the term evolved in a sociological sense into the practice of gathering the ranks of the Catholic hierarchy but also of the faithful around the centre of the Catholic faith, strongly marked by the papal service but also the person of the Pope (Aubert 1976, 408–425). Along with the mentioned culture of attachment to the Catholic tradition and the hierarchical position of the papal office, an emotional loyalty and even devotion to the person of the Holy Father developed an expression that at that time became constant, and often literally understood (Gibson 1989,

265–267). The phenomenon had a cultural background dating back to the era of European romanticism, which saw the papacy as a stronghold of the surviving ancient spirituality in contrast with the commercial and capitalist spirit of the era (Harrison 2014, 236–275).

In a comparative sense, the new role of the Pope was an anachronistic case that the appreciation of the role of a single monarch was strengthened from within, from the social base, at a time when monarchy was weakening everywhere or had already been abolished (Atkin 2003, 130.) It is indicative that precisely the loss of political sovereignty further strengthened the image of the papacy as the centre and source of the Church's activities, its immutability, and the permanence of its institutions. In the earlier centuries of European history, the dynamics of church life followed the networking of traditions, as well as the charismatic interventions of individuals and groups, and did not regularly refer to the papacy as a comprehensive model of all spectrums of life — from theology, liturgy, church discipline, spirituality, art, culture, etc. On the political level, the spirit of revolution and liberalism will legally and materially limit and even block the scope of activities of the hierarchical Church.

Models of restoration, in the spiritual and normative sense, were anchored in the papacy and Rome, experienced as the centre and identity stronghold of Catholicism. The practical consequence of this new experience is the intensification of the place of the city of Rome. It was no longer the seat of the papal state, but the seat of the papal chair; it was developing into an increasingly important pilgrimage destination. Through the veneration of holy places, from antiquity to the present day, the all-time unity of the Church of Christ was formed, which would overcome contemporary difficulties and even persecution like those of the Christians of Roman times. Added to that experience was the powerful experience of visiting the recently explored and accessible catacombs. Pilgrimages had the goal to meet the Pope at increasingly frequent mass audiences, which became an unavoidable point of the Roman pilgrimage itinerary. More and more students, mainly candidates for the priesthood, were coming to Rome from all continents to the church colleges, and this was the time of the founding of numerous national or religious seminaries and related cultural institutions precisely in Rome.¹ Perhaps the most significant new college was *Pontifical North American College*, founded in 1859.² In this way, the Catholic identity was really and not only symbolically nurtured and socially networked in Rome (Aubert 1990, 45–50).

1 <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13131a.htm> (Accessed 13. 01. 2024).

2 <https://www.pnac.org/about-us/about-the-nac/> (Accessed 13. 01. 2024).

4. *Catholic Action*

The aforementioned centripetal tendencies within the Catholic Church of the second half of the 19th century are not passively directed only towards the center. The papacy gathered the faithful but also returned them to everyday life. In theological terms, it sent them on a mission. It is not an invention of this epoch that there was an awareness of the intensification of the Church's pastoral engagement, especially towards newly created social strata such as the working class. In earlier times, lay people rarely participated in pastoral activities, which were mainly catechetical teaching of children and young people in families, by literate family members; the practice encouraged by the priests. Very often catholic lay teachers and private tutors of children from aristocratic families played a key role in their Christian formation. Even in the late Middle Ages, members of the lay spiritual community of *Devotio Moderna* took care of the education of pupils as well as university students, for whom they also organized institutes with a highly emphasized spiritual–educational program (Van Engen 2008, 144–154). Erasmus of Rotterdam, Ignatius Loyola (Loyola 1992, 73), and Jean Calvin (Bouwsma 1988, 12) stayed in one such, the famous Montaigne Institute in Paris. Such significant undertakings were part of the medieval social standard, which saw any quality education as Christian education.

The society of the second half of the 19th century brought a number of significant changes to the way of life of the broad classes, which would strongly raise the level of higher–quality involvement of lay people in formative apostolates. First of all, the fact that lay people were incomparably more educated and more experienced in businesses compared to previous generations. A significant number of lay people mastered new social skills and reached the most diverse layers of society, a task that was increasingly difficult for clergy to perform. In this sense, it is understandable that the process of organizing the laity was a joint venture of the clergy and laity. Associations and groups were founded within local ecclesiastic communities, but soon it was urgent to invent a better–formulated purpose and a specific mission. The political, i.e., secular frameworks of action were very limited, on the Church's side, there was even less space in many respects. It became especially difficult after the entry of the Italian army into Rome in 1870, and the Pope's refusal to abolish the Papal State, which was also reflected in the Pope's ban on Catholics from active participation in political life by the decree *Non Expedit*, which Catholics were forbidden from voting (Marotta 2013, 215–235; Pollard 2008, 37). The decree was the result of an almost ubiquitous spontaneous Catholic rejection of the rigorous reduction of the role of the Church. For a long time, it did not cause significant resistance among Catholics (Martina 1970, 850; Marotta 2014, 101–102).

Parties of Catholic provenance and the lay movement developed faster in the countries of Northern Europe, e.g., Germany, Belgium, Austria, and then Italy. However, the Italian movement profiled itself as a model for others and demonstrated durability and effectiveness. The hierarchical Church made a significant effort in monitoring and shaping the movement. Therefore, the honor of the birth of Catholic action went to the event of September 1867, when two young students, Mario Fani and Giovanni Acquaderni founded the Society of Italian Catholic Youth (*Società della Gioventù Cattolica Italiana*) in Bologna. On that occasion, the coined motto: “Prayer, apostolate, sacrifice,” summed up fidelity to the fundamental principles of the movement. The permanent ideas of the movement were: obedience to the Pope (“sentire cum Ecclesia”), an educational project of religious education, life according to the principles of Christianity, acts of mercy towards the needy and the poorest (Poggi 1967, 15). The first umbrella organization of a massive gathering of Catholics under these conditions was founded in 1874–5, called the *Opera dei Congressi*. The name (*Opera dei Congressi* = the deeds of the congresses) indicated the regulation that the annual gatherings (congresses) were directing future activities. Different bodies of the lay movement would branch out of it, and under the leadership of the Church, they would reach ever wider social strata (Chadwick 1998, 313). The upward organizational and pastoral–spiritual evolution of the movement reached its peak in the dramatic period between the two world wars.

The impossibility of organized political activity of Catholics under the patronage of the Church appeared to be a political handicap, but in the long run, it would prove to be a protective mechanism against the risky entry into the slippery ground of political and parliamentary struggle that forced participants to make various concessions and moral oversights in the struggle to stay in the game in the political field. The experience of political parties that formally or informally presented themselves as Catholic showed relatively modest effect, and even such associations were often short-lived and under constant threats of manipulation or non-implementation in the intricate tangle of parliamentary alliances or negotiations (Boyer 2004). Parties with a Catholic sign had in certain times also achieved noticeable results that would prove to be democratic political capital in the post-1945 era when it was necessary to find personnel capable of politically, ethically, and strategically building a new Europe (Kaiser 2004, 2)

The Catholic lay movement was truly a complete novelty, both within church structures and practice, and at the level of the Church’s activities outside. In pre-revolutionary Europe, such a thing would seem contradictory. The various lay movements and activities existed, but there was no Catholic movement as such, facing everyone and inviting everyone into its ranks, not excluding any separate spiritual tradition or already existing

Catholic grouping. In this sense, the Catholic movement was a reflex of the Church's self-defense, which addressed the masses with an appeal for a Catholic response to the marginalization of the Church and Christian values from society. Therefore, calls to the laity to recapture (reconquest!) national life, to re-Christianise society, a reality that for the people of that time was a recent past, even a nostalgic past, should not be surprising (Webster 1960, 3–4).

Slowly but steadily, the catholic laity lost the notion that the catholic life was unimaginable outside the old monarchical social structure. The very idea of maintaining the *ancien régime* was obviously an impossible task because its deconstruction had different models and levels of substitution. However, the Christian reflex of resistance reacted at critical moments. Certain forms of resistance, which until today are often perceived as failed — such as the Pope's obstinacy in the attempt to preserve the minimum sovereignty of the Papal State — nevertheless played the role of mobilizing Catholics in several ways. In terms of evaluating the hierarchical structure of the Church, the struggle for papal sovereignty was not a remnant of feudal nostalgia. It was the insistence and testimony that for Catholics the structure of the Church is not just one of many ephemeral social institutions but something specifically Catholic, with a theological base that no one outside the Church needs to adopt but rather understand as a Catholic specificity, and consequently accept it in the culture of democratic mutual understanding. Ultimately, the Lateran Treaties and the formation of the Vatican State could be considered an act of pluralism that respects the peculiarities.

Conclusion

The organized Catholic laity has always wanted to be a social and publicly recognizable movement. It is an ecclesial and pastoral intervention of the Church of a very specific time, which tries to better respond to contemporary challenges in a socially visible way, i.e., through organizing, planning, and promoting its values. The society that the Church addressed in this way was mostly the European society of the 19th and early 20th centuries, which is defined as class revolutionary, socially egalitarian, ideologically and economically liberal, individualistic, and secular. The sum of these orientations, ideas, and social demands was to a large extent critical, repulsive, and even militantly hostile towards the European religious tradition, the bearer and guardian of which was the Catholic Church.

An equally important form of resistance was the “discovery” of the laity. Perhaps at the time it looked like a desperate move to mobilize additional forces of “*Il clero di riserva*”, the reserve clergy (*Il clero di riserva* was the title of the work of the Italian–American sociologist Gianfranco Poggi, pub-

lished in 1963), in difficult moments. The real effect and the legacy of the organized laity are understandable in the Pentecostal dimension, theologically speaking, in two aspects. The first is that of social effectiveness — charitable activities, education, social life, and culture — which led to the strengthening or discovery of the Catholic identity. The second effect is the transformation within the church. Regardless of the inherited models of relationship between laymen and clergy, Catholics began to renew their primary identity meaning that both are first and foremost the members of *populus Dei*, the flock of believers, the community on mission. Still imperfectly united, but in an attempt to give an answer for the hope with which we pass the test of the credibility of faith.

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*Sažetak***KATOLIČKA AKCIJA: POVIJESNI OKVIR NASTANKA ORGANIZIRANOGA LAIKATA**

IVICA MUSA, IVAN ŠESTAK

Višestoljetni model Crkve kao zajednice laika i klerika koji ju inspiriraju i vode, ulazi u funkcionalnu krizu. U doba revolucija i liberalizma laici se nalaze u novim, često oprečnim ulogama: vjernika odanih Crkvi i građana lojalnih sekularnom društvu. Tražeći izlaz iz krize, Crkva se oslanja na sposobnost demokratskog djelovanja laika koji svojim društvenim nastupom promiču kršćanske vrijednosti, ali se i bore za politička prava Crkve. Uz političke stranke katoličke inspiracije posebnu ulogu ima organizirani katolički laikat, kulturno i moralno oblikujući laičke staleže. Pretpovijest nastanka katoličkoga laičkog pokreta (Katoličke akcije) daje uvide u složenost društava druge polovice XIX. i početka XX. st., ali i zavidnu razinu inventivnosti i laika i hijerarhije u aktiviranju laika, što će postati epohalni uspjeh Crkve XX. stoljeća.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: laički pokret, Katolička akcija, liberalno društvo, sekularizam, papinstvo, revolucija

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