

A Long Editorial But It Could Be Longer

By Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, February 1935, 7.

Summary: Traces the program difficulties of Catholic Action to the belief that there is no need for it. Encourages both Communists and Catholics to study the capitalistic system and to compare the similarities and differences in order to raise questions. Sees the need for liturgy and sociology to be linked. Encourages individual responsibility for doing the works of mercy. (DDLW #15).

We heard one woman say at a meeting last month, “I am getting fed up with Catholic Action!”

If C.A. means just study clubs, reading and talk, as those who are sincerely going in for it seem to think; or bridge games, and a little catechetical work on the side—then we don’t blame people for being fed up with it.

We’ve heard people groaning over the idea of study clubs for a long time. They probably would not be so bored with the idea if they were fighting for their lives as well as their principles as they are doing down in Mexico. The trouble is that most people do not yet see any necessity for C.A. They have liberty, freedom of worship, they can send their children to Catholic schools—they are pretty comfortable as yet. For those who are out of work, for the hungry, it is hard for them to see any point in perfecting their knowledge of the theory, the technique of Catholic Action. What they shout for is “real action,” “political action” and in some cases, “violent action.”

The usual rather futile comment of the comfortable is—“We know something has to be done—but what can we do about it”—and they are uncomfortable in their comfort and if they are blessed with a conscience, they suffer without knowing what to do about it.

Catholic Action provides a program for all, of actual work as well as a study of technique and theory. That is—the work is there provided people would be content to do the little thing—the immediate thing, the thing that comes to hand. “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it.” It does not matter what it is, or whether you can figure out its place in the huge pattern of reconstruction.

Why are study clubs essential? For the knowledge of fundamentals. For the knowledge of Catholic philosophy. Without a philosophy to direct your actions they are indeed futile and misdirected.

Is it hard to study abstract principles? Well, here is a plan by which you can study with some definite end in view.

Take the Daily Worker, the Communist newspaper—you can get it at any newsstand in New York (and we don’t care if we are boosting the circulation of the paper by this advice either. As a matter of fact, one issue of the paper should last you a long time). Study the Communist criticism of the present system.

What is the Catholic criticism? What remedies do the Communists offer? What is the Catholic solution?

To illustrate: I have before me a copy of The Daily Worker for January 23. On the front page there is a story of the shirt-makers' strike, a steel strike, the National Biscuit Company strike, a strike of 25,000 oil workers in Mexico, the discussion of a wool workers' strike. These stories lead to study of what the church thinks of organization of workers. This is taken up in the first part of the encyclical "Forty year after." Are our present unions illustrative of what the Pope wanted? If they are not, how to make them so? If there is no other existing union, is it permissible to join a union which is dominated by Communists? What action did Matt Talbot, the Irish workingman-saint, take in the general strike in Ireland? What about picketing? The necessity of emphasizing the idea of non-violent activities. What about the action of the consumer or outsider in the strike?

We could go on indefinitely but let's pass to other front-page stories in the Daily Worker. A discussion of Fascism and Nazism. What is the Church's stand? Is the Church universal or is it National? The dangers of Nationalism. The dangers of dictatorship. The Church's attitude in regard to the dignity of the individual-individual responsibility, the individual and the family unit to begin with.

There is another story about the President's social security program. What about state regulation, state capitalism, state socialism, fascism (progressive steps). How far should the state be allowed to "regulate" human activities: Jefferson's ideas as to the "less government there is the better it is." Self-regulation as opposed to state regulation.

(And here is a light note: On the bottom of the page, a large two-column box, WANTED: RED BUILDERS! In other words, people to sell the Daily Worker on the streets. The call is for a hundred, probably to compete with our gang who are selling THE CATHOLIC WORKER on Fourteenth street, 34th street and 42nd street. Competition is the life of trade, Peter Maurin!)

If you study Communist theory and practice, and Catholic theory and practice, and then uphold the latter, you will be doing a constructive piece of work in combating the materialist philosophy of the present day. You cannot uphold the Catholic program without influencing others. You cannot talk of Catholic principles without putting them into practice.

Of what use is it to teach catechism and tell the children of the love that is necessary they have for their neighbor, without having them go out and act on that love. If you love your neighbor you wish to serve him.

You cannot receive the Blessed Sacrament without becoming sensitive to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit and these inspirations are to be put into practice.

Do you know your neighbor in the first place? Or do you live in a neighborhood where nobody speaks to anyone else? If you want to reach him, employ Commu-

nist technique to do it. You could canvass your apartment house, for instance, to get subscriptions to some Catholic paper (THE CATHOLIC WORKER is cheap!), and by doing this you are coming into contact with Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Perhaps some of them are Communists. You can acknowledge to them that their criticism of the present order is just and this may lead to further discussion which will clarify your mind and theirs. You can petition your Catholic neighbors for clothes to aid the needy, or food to feed the hungry. Your St. Vincent de Paul society would be glad of the clothes if you can't dispose of them. Perhaps in your peregrinations you will come across neighbors who are in need and whom you can help. This advice is for those middle class ones who are anxious to do something but who do not know what to do. The poor find enough to do all right. And they are the most generous in sharing what they have. Their insecurity has made them god-like in their recklessness of the morrow. If they have two coats they do as Christ bade them. What food or coats they have they very often are called upon to share.

Oh, we can fill our lives up with Catholic Action all right, if we just look around us. We can link up liturgy and sociology, in other words. And as for collaboration with the clergy, if you are in earnest you can find some priest only too willing to co-operate, if not in your own parish, then in another. And if this is not possible, collaborate with your confessor and go in for individual C.A.

And above all, be generous—and lavish. Christ is lavish with His gift to us—why should we fear to be extravagant in return? Do not say to yourself, “where will it all end, if I start this?”

I have heard people say, in coming in contact with need: “If I supply them with groceries this week, they will be expecting me to keep it up.” But I do not think it works out this way. It has not with us, here at THE CATHOLIC WORKER office. In fact when we have made gifts of food, clothing, a bit of money (though that seldom) it has usually been the other way around. The recipients have come back to see what they could do for us.

The early Christians started with the works of mercy and it was this technique which converted the world.

They run in this wise:

The corporal works—To feed the hungry; to give drink to the thirsty; to clothe the naked; to harbor the harborless; to ransom the captive; to visit the sick; to bury the dead.

The spiritual works are—To instruct the ignorant; to counsel the doubtful; to admonish sinners; to bear wrongs patiently; to forgive offense willingly; to comfort the afflicted; to pray for the living and the dead.

Not all of these works are within the reach of all—that is understood. But that we should take part in some of them is a matter of obligation, a “strict precept imposed both by the natural and Divine law.”

**

P.S.—Not one of the ten prayer books we went through around the office listed these works of mercy, though they listed the seven deadly sins.