

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_canadian-journal.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php)

# The Roman Catholic Laity of Canada

W. NELSON THOMSON

## *Pax Christi In Regno Christi*

(Motto of Catholic Action)

“O Lord our Christ, may we have  
Thy mind and Thy Spirit; make us  
instruments of Thy peace . . . for  
it is in giving that we receive.”

(From a prayer of St. Francis of Assisi,  
patron of Catholic Action)

The era of superficial, fearful, shabby Catholicism, locked in the churches and in the recesses of the heart, is over. The hour has come for the convinced, the active, the militant to take Christ into all the *milieux* in which He is not found.<sup>1</sup>

THE multiform activities of Catholic laymen are causing concern and alarm among Protestants, but few realize how much Roman Catholicism is counting on its lay militia in the world of today. In Canada, Catholic lay activity is taking on unprecedented proportions. There is much that we can learn from a study of the “lay apostolate” in our country. This is a general term applied to the attempt on the part of Roman Catholic laymen to catholicize every area of life. Within the general concept of the lay apostolate are included several forms of activity. *Catholic Action* (hereafter referred to as CA) may be defined as “the organization of the Catholic laity, consecrated to the apostolate in aid of, and in direct dependence on the hierarchy, in view of the triumph of the Kingdom of Christ, in individuals, in the family, and in society at large.”<sup>2</sup> The Protestant Reformation is charged with initiating modern manifestations of Anti-Christ, and with keeping Christ out of family, school, press, government, entertainment, ethics, and literature. To quote what is to date probably the most important book on CA:

Liberalism, child of that bloody mother, the French Revolution, and grand-child of rationalist Protestantism, broke up the framework of the Christian *civitas*, that glory of bygone days, by proclaiming religion to be but a private affair, and relieving the governments of any duty in its regard. . . . Hence the separation of state from church . . .<sup>3</sup>

Before the modern era, CA had “no reason for existence.”<sup>4</sup> In past centuries, the public powers were the “secular arm” of protection for the church, but

1. *La L.O.C. Canadienne* (Montreal: Fides, 1947), p. 278. Author's translation.

2. L. Civardi, *Manual of Catholic Action*, trans. C. C. Martindale (London: Sheed and Ward, 1935), I, p. 8.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 106-107.

present liberal society requires the effective mobilization of the laity. It is the task of CA to create the synthesis between religion and life that modern industrial society tends to make difficult. In Pius XI's encyclical *Ubi Arcano*, it is declared that the Church is to be the "mistress and guide of every other society whatever."<sup>5</sup> CA seeks that society should be open for development in a spiritual direction. It attempts to influence the structure of institutions which seem to reduce man to a mere cipher. It leaves to *Catholic Social Action* direct activity in the profane order. CA's activity commits the Church, because it is mandated by the hierarchy. Catholic Social Action only commits individual Catholics as such.

The Catholic, by virtue of baptism and confirmation, is a member of the mystical body of Christ, and must therefore take seriously his apostolate. St. Thomas affirms that man is at the centre of the universe, where matter and spirit intersect. On this intermediate plane, where spiritual and temporal join, "the laity is called by Catholic Action to collaborate in the apostolate of the teaching church."<sup>6</sup> CA has given a greater awareness of the Church to many of the faithful who formerly thought only of gaining their own salvation. They are taken up into "une action concertée sur ce qu'on nomme parfois les structures temporelles, une action catholique qui se prolonge en action sociale, voire même en action politique."<sup>7</sup> Theoretically, then, the Church does not meddle with temporal affairs as such.

The first task of CA is to deepen the spiritual life of its participants; to cultivate their consciences and strengthen them in the virtues of justice, prudence, temperance, and fortitude. The "evangelical counsels" of poverty, chastity, and obedience, insofar as there exists no conflict with the duties of one's state in life, "constitute a program for anyone who rightly claims to be a Christian."<sup>8</sup> Study of the liturgy and frequent assistance at Mass are urged upon the lay "militants". "Through Mary . . . they will . . . bring God into individual souls and families and society; for she is the indispensable channel, the Mediatrix of All Grace."<sup>9</sup> "The first division of Catholic Action (formation) is ordered towards the second (apostolate)."<sup>10</sup> The Catholic layman, his faith strengthened, heeds Christ's word to Peter, "When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren" (Lk. 22:32). His aim is then: *Omnia instaurare in Christo* (Eph. 1:10). Five things are required of CA members (1) a solid piety, (2) an exact knowledge of religion, (3) entire obedience and unlimited devotion to the pope and bishops who alone rule the church

5. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

6. J. Maritain, *True Humanism* (London: G. Bles: The Centenary Press, 1938), p. 294.

7. Roger Aubert, *La Théologie Catholique au Milieu du XX<sup>e</sup> Siècle* (Paris: Casterman, 1954), p. 57. Author's translation: "a concerted action on what are sometimes called temporal structures, a Catholic action which extends to social action and even to political action."

8. James O'Toole, *What is Catholic Action?* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts Inc., 1952), p. 25.

9. Stephen Anderl and Ruth Fellman, *The Technique of the Catholic Action Cell* (La Crosse, Wisconsin: St. Rose Convent, 1950), p. 121.

10. Civardi, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

(Acts 20:28), (4) ardent and active zeal, and (5) charity towards one's neighbours.<sup>11</sup>

The layman is encouraged to Christianize his own *milieu*. This is defined as "the combined preoccupations, influences, customs, persons, similitude of work, which create the atmosphere and characterize the providential place where one is called to work."<sup>12</sup> The scope of CA, then, includes "moral conditions, industrial relations, political relations, race relations, and international relations."<sup>13</sup>

Each CA group has a priest as chaplain and assistant. He is considered to be a member of a working team. Exercising the authority of his office, he safeguards the group's orthodoxy and acts as moral and religious consultant. "He is the 'soul' of his association,"<sup>14</sup> in the sense that he helps laymen to see and undertake personal responsibility.

The story of specialized CA, as we know it today, cannot be complete without reference to Canon Joseph Cardijn of Belgium. While he was a priest in a poor industrial area, in the early years of this century, he developed a plan for reaching the working class for Christ. He organized groups of study clubs for workers, founding the *Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne* (JOC) in 1912. After the first World War, the formation of the *Jocist* movement began in earnest. It gradually spread from country to country, and received the full approval of Rome in 1925.

The *Jocist* method has been applied to all the specialized CA groups, a method which "Cardijn lifted bodily from St. Thomas Aquinas,"<sup>15</sup> whose three steps in arriving at a wise action were Counsel, Judgement, and Command. The "inquiry method" of *Jocists* simply renames these steps Observe, Judge, and Act. Groups, following the *Jocist* technique, are organized according to age, sex, and occupation. For example, a priest desiring to initiate CA among workers or students, will select the natural leaders of the "crowd" or "gang"—those who determine "the thought, the aspirations, the entertainment, the business, the sin, and the virtue of the group."<sup>16</sup> Once having fired these Catholic leaders with the vision of transforming their environment insofar as it may be pagan, he forms them into a "cell." Each member of a cell is required to interest other students or workers in the project; these comprise his "team." From six to twelve is the usual membership of cells and teams, which meet weekly. Eventually teams become cells, and new recruits are thus constantly forthcoming. A "section" comprises a group of leaders (i.e., a cell), their teams and the more or less formal contacts of both on the parish level. These contacts are the "general mem-

11. A. Boulenger, *La Doctrine Catholique*, (Lyon-Paris: Emmanuel Vitte, 1936), II, 250 bis.

12. Joseph Charbonneau, *Catholic Action, Pastoral Letter of the Archbishop of Montreal* (Montreal: Fides, 1943).

13. John A. Ryan, *Citizen, Church and State* (New York: Paulist Press, 1941), p. 20.

14. Civardi, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

15. F. N. Wendell, *The Formation of a Lay Apostle*, (New York: The Third Order of St. Dominic, 1954), p. 87.

16. Anderl and Fellman, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

bers" of a section. A number of sections of any specialized movement in one diocese make up a "federation."

The present pope has clarified the distinct types into which CA can be divided as follows:

Action Catholique *par objet*—un mouvement d'Action Catholique visant à rechristianiser la radio, la presse, le cinéma, etc.

Action Catholique *de milieu*—nos mouvements d'Action Catholique spécialisée visant un milieu de vie.

Action Catholique *familiale*—un mouvement "structuré" sur les familles comme telles et, visant leur rénovation chrétienne.

Action Catholique *unitaire* basée sur la classification humaine, hommes, femmes, jeunes gens, jeunes filles.<sup>17</sup>

The last quarter century has witnessed the phenomenal growth of specialized CA, especially in "French Canada with its amazing development on the models of France and Belgium."<sup>18</sup> CA in French Canada, capitalizes on the concept of *milieu*; alarmed at the pragmatism and secularism accompanying the rapid development of industry, it aims at protecting Catholic culture.

Il est incontestable que la réorientation à l'époque moderne de l'apostolat de l'Eglise Catholique, selon la formule des mouvements spécialisés d'Action Catholique, signifie un effort d'adaptation à des structures sociales en voie de transformation. Alors qu'autrefois, par la paroisse, l'église rejoignait la totalité d'une communauté homogène de fidèles, il faut maintenant atteindre directement, au-delà de la frontière paroissiale, chacun des groupes professionnellement différenciés et socialement mobiles, dont est constituée la société hétérogène d'une civilisation urbaine.<sup>19</sup>

Some of the most important specialized Canadian movements were initiated in the 1930's in French Canada: *La Jeunesse Ouvrière Catholique* in 1932, *La Jeunesse Etudiante Catholique* in 1935, *La Jeunesse Agricole Catholique* in 1936, *La Jeunesse Indépendante Catholique* in 1936, and *La Ligue Ouvrière Catholique* in 1938. These movements have been nationally mandated by the assembly of Bishops. *La Ligue Ouvrière Catholique* is for

17. *Caractères Fondamentaux de la JEC Canadienne* (Montreal: Secretariat de la JEC, 1951), p. 17. Author's translation:

"Catholic Action according to *object*—a movement of Catholic Action aiming to re-Christianize radio, press, cinema, etc.

"Catholic Action according to *milieu*—movements directed to the environment (the word actually means more than this) of life.

"Catholic Action of the *family*—a movement built upon families as such and seeking their Christian renewal.

"Catholic Action by *units*—based on human classification, men, women, young men, young women."

18. John Fitzsimons and Paul McGuire, *Restoring All Things* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1938), p. 96.

19. Jean C. Falardeau, "Rôle et Importance de l'Eglise au Canada Français," *Esprit*, (Paris, August-September, 1952), pp. 225-226. Author's translation: "It cannot be contended that the reorientation, in the modern era, of the apostolate of the Catholic Church, according to the form of the specialized movements of Catholic Action, signifies an effort of adaptation to social structures in the process of transformation. Whilst formerly, by means of the parish, the church joined together a whole homogeneous community of the faithful, it is now necessary to reach directly, beyond the borders of the parish each of the professionally differentiated groups participating in the social flux, that make up the heterogeneous society of an urban civilization."

adults, as contrasted with the other movements which are for youth (ages 16–30). The *indépendant* movements are intended for professionals, industrialists, and functionaries; i.e. for all those who constitute the middle and leading classes of society and who enjoy a certain amount of economic and social *indépendance*.

*La Jeunesse Ouvrière Catholique* (Young Christian Workers) has been called by Pius XI "a model for Catholic Action." Its aims are very broad: to help young workers in achieving an integrated Christian life and in applying the social teaching of the Church to their life as workers; to form a nucleus of workers who can themselves find Christian solutions to their problems, and then gradually change the mentality of their *milieu* preparatory to having these solutions accepted by the authorities. The best way to get a concrete idea of *JOCism* is to consider some of the "inquiries" or programmes of research that have taken place in French Canada in recent years: 1943–44, Workers' Housing; 1945–46, Credit and Consumers' Co-operatives; 1946–47, Family Revenue; 1949–50, Christian Social Awareness; 1952–53, Recreation in the Worker's Family. An annual week of propaganda informs the public of results of research. Conferences, forums, summer camps, savings co-operatives, rehabilitation and orientation for delinquent youth are but a few of the *Jocists'* accomplishments. In the English-speaking sections social inquiry has been directed at a study of marriage and unemployment in workers' *milieux*. Various services aimed at providing spiritual guidance are at the disposal of diocesan sections of CA movements. Literature is prepared, correspondence courses are arranged, speakers are sent to give local guidance, and secretariats are maintained. In 1941, the JOC founded, as a result of a vast research on the problems of young people, *Le Service de Préparation au Mariage*. The popular English-language periodical, *Leader*, is widely read by members of YCW; a monthly magazine, *L'Action Catholique Ouvrière*, is published jointly by JOC and LOC.

The LOC groups adults of the working class for the application of the Church's social doctrine to their problems of work and family. A triple programme—religious, social, and family—covers the interests and needs of the members. Regular study circles make observations and deductions, while periodic larger assemblies reach a greater number with their conclusions. A trained member of the organization will upon request help any family to work out a budget. In several towns and cities the LOC arranges with municipal authorities to put vacant lots at the disposal of workers for co-operative vegetable gardens. Seeds are obtained at wholesale prices. Workers' "villas" are being built in the country to provide working men and their families with a week of summer holiday at a very modest cost. Study circles for married couples discuss, often with the help of professional people, the problems of the modern home. In addition, countless services are rendered, e.g. counsel for pregnant women, supervision of playgrounds, and courses in practical skills. Popular meetings aimed at reaching the

masses, and retreats for active members are included in the programme. Housing co-operatives are established, soon to become administratively independent of LOC. Study circles are formed for unmarried women to help them to accept the Christian significance of their role. The LOC is an inspiring practical example of CA aiming at and reaching precise objects.

How is the lay apostolate coordinated? In French Canada there are many diocesan committees to promote CA. The diocesan committee is a federated body coordinating the work and promoting the growth of various movements, and serving as intermediary between the groups it represents and the larger framework of CA as nationally organized. The committee is usually mandated by the bishop for two or three years, after which period appointments may be renewed or others made. The assembly of bishops is *ex officio* in charge of CA in Canada. The Canadian Catholic Conference (CCC) with permanent secretariat in Ottawa is the annual meeting of all bishops. An episcopal commission is delegated to concern itself with CA on a national scale. In addition to episcopally-named chaplains for each specialized CA movement which has received a national mandate, there is a French-speaking chaplain for general CA. *Le Comité National d'Action Catholique* (CNAC) is the legislative organism for French Canada. As no comparable organization exists for English-speaking Catholics, it tends more or less exclusively to represent Canadian CA to public bodies and before international organizations. It promotes different forms of consultation and cooperation between national committees of the specialized movements, and the various diocesan committees. It also maintains friendly relationships with all forms of the lay apostolate. Six members of the CNAC form the executive committee, which meets twice monthly. Under the authority of this committee there is a national secretariat, the chief of which is also secretary of the executive. Thirty French dioceses are affiliated with the CNAC. A monthly mimeographed report of about 35 pages concerning Canadian and world events in CA is produced in Montreal: *Nouvelles de l'Action Catholique Canadienne*.

Most organizations of the lay apostolate maintain an international headquarters to receive reports and to act as a clearing house of information and guidance. At the first World Congress for the Apostolate of the Laity, held in Rome in 1951, national delegations came from seventy-four countries and from thirty-eight international organizations; there was also representation from seventeen ethnic groups in exile. Among the items discussed in workshops at the congress were public opinion, charity, the family, youth, the school, workers' and professional worlds, recreation, civic life, international life, migrations, artistic life, ecumenicity, and the intellectual world. As a result, the following year, the Permanent Committee for International Congresses of the Apostolate of the Laity was instituted to make further studies; to provide information; to facilitate future international congresses (the next one took place in Rome in 1957, the theme being "The Laity in the Crisis of the Modern World: Their Responsibilities and their Train-

ing"); and to act as a liaison between various international organisms. Regional meetings are frequent; e.g. the Inter-American Week of Catholic Action is a conference held every four years for sharing insights between Canada, the United States, Latin and South America.

Let us consider the lay apostolate in a few actual Canadian dioceses. In Regina, the *Jocist* "inquiry method" was formerly used, but changes have become inevitable. The YCW was developed for a factory area, heavily populated, where dire poverty produced an un-Christian environment. Few of these conditions prevail in the west, and so the "Dandelion" programme, developed at Claresholme, Alberta by Father P. B. O'Byrne, was accepted for youth groups. "Dandelion" is an attempt to adapt specialized CA to ordinary youth clubs; the *milieu* concept is not emphasized. The Calgary diocese has also adopted this programme. The "cell" technique is replaced by apostolic and spiritual programmes culminating in action. Some "Dandelion" projects are: promoting a Christian Christmas with Christian displays and advertising, cleaning up side shows at fairs, improving moral effects of dances, spreading and encouraging good literature, encouraging separate schools, promoting the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, and spreading healthy attitudes on immigration and labour relations.

The Archdiocese of Montreal is heavily populated, and thoroughly organized for the lay apostolate, particularly for specialized CA. Twenty priests are engaged full time and twenty-three part time on the diocesan level. Parochial priests generally co-operate as chaplains of one or several associations. The *Ligues du Sacré-Cœur* publish and freely distribute literature aiming to improve morality; to reduce blasphemy, drunkenness, and immoral literature; and to establish family devotions. *Service de Préparation à la Vie*, begun by LICF under inspiration of the Montreal diocesan committee of CA in 1946, attempts to instruct teenagers concerning problems of adolescence and of the world they will face on leaving school. *Service d'Education Familiale* stresses instruction of parents on family problems. Study groups dependent on the *Institut Pie XI* of the University of Montreal have begun in several localities. The work of the Legion of Mary consists in visiting families (Catholic and other), visiting in hospitals and prisons, teaching the catechism, and converting heretics, including Jehovah's Witnesses. *Le Comité Saint-Paul des oeuvres de conversion interne* works towards the conversion of non-Catholics. CA is most effective in four areas—labour, family, recreation, education—proportionate effectiveness implied in order of listing. In the field of social action the following movements are at work: *La Confédération de Travailleurs Catholiques*, *L'Union des Cultivateurs*, *La Fédération Canadienne des Ecoles de Parents*, *Caisse Populaire*, and co-operatives.

In Bathurst, New Brunswick, a rather large diocese, some 3,000 adults studied social questions in the light of the papal encyclicals for a period of six months during 1954. Among the sodalities the Legion of Mary has proved to be the most effective. In general, CA affects most profoundly the



domains of family, labour and education. In some parishes complete changes have been procured: Catholic schools opened, co-operatives organized, and labour troubles resolved.

In 1927, a Catholic priest analyzed the causes of failure in the development of Canadian CA. He placed the blame upon individualism, parochialism, and nationalism. By the last he meant the division of Catholicism into various ethnic groups. While all of these problems have not been solved, CA has made great strides since that time; a call was issued for the "regional organization of Catholic forces following the main zones of the country"<sup>20</sup> and the "co-ordination . . . of them all, in the pursuance of a common cause."<sup>20</sup> In the light of the material presented above, no better summary of the method of present-day CA can be found.

What are the implications of the Catholic lay apostolate? Here it is best to let Catholic sources speak for themselves. Civardi says:

There is a field in which all Catholics must be united religiously; that of politico-moral questions and the defense of religion. Here all sons of the church must feel the duty of solidarity, and form a compact army. Here all discord is treachery. When the supreme interests of religion and morals are at stake, party interests and *personal opinions must keep silence*. For the Salvation of souls all must be sacrificed.<sup>21</sup>

A Canadian Catholic writer has put the aim of the church, and therefore of CA, very clearly: "Or, pour une moitié du pays environ, la voix de l'Etat, c'est nous".<sup>22</sup> As another author puts it, Canadian Catholicism

forme une entité homogène qui a tous les paliers de son organisation sociale: famille, paroisses, diocèse, pays entier, possède les plus puissants ressorts d'une action d'ensemble, s'inspire d'une doctrine solide et sure, et obéit à un mécanisme de gouvernement éprouvé par les siècles.<sup>23</sup>

This would perhaps cause no particular anxiety to Protestants were it not for the fact that Canon Law states (regarding civil and ecclesiastical authorities) that "the spiritual power should . . . get the preference in a conflict of jurisdiction."<sup>24</sup>

Our main concern, however, should be—not to sound the alarm about CA—but to call Protestant laymen to action. It is true that many social welfare and philanthropic institutions, now secular, had their origins in evangelical Christianity. Because they were not ecclesiastically controlled

20. G. T. Daly, *Catholic Action*, (Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1927), p. 124.

21. L. Civardi, *op. cit.*, p. 209. Italics ours.

22. Georges Simard, *Les Etats Chrétiens et l'Eglise* (Ottawa: Editions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1942), p. 175. Author's translation: "For about half of the country we are the voice of the state."

23. "La Situation Présente du Catholicisme au Canada," *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa*, XV, (Oct.-Dec., 1945), p. 404. Author's translation: ". . . forms a homogeneous entity which at every level of its social organization: family, parishes, diocese, and the country as a whole, possesses the most powerful springs of united action, takes its inspiration from solid and certain doctrine, and obeys a system of government proven by the centuries."

24. S. Woywod, *A Practical Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, Rev. ed., (New York: Joseph F. Wagner Inc., 1948), I, p. 2.

their Christian distinctiveness is not now explicit. But this appeal to history must not be made to acquit ourselves of responsibility.

Just in the degree to which Protestantism had succeeded in penetrating, disciplining, moralizing the democracy, industry, technology, science, education of the Anglo-American world, it had become inextricably involved in the corresponding social and institutional structures of that world and assimilated to them. Just in the degree to which Roman Catholicism had made less contribution to the Christianizing of modern civilization, had held itself aloof, psychologically and in its institutional structure, it was in a better position to take an independent line and exert leadership in the demoralization of that civilization.<sup>25</sup>

The author concludes that no Protestant denomination has yet dreamed of enlisting the Church Militant in anything like the scope practised by CA. The significant difference apparently is that CA groups laymen into teams with definite purposes and goals. A small group of people with similar background effectively correlate their study and action, the latter being definitely guided by church teaching and aimed at effecting changes in the secular *milieu*. Individual activity is encouraged, but *group* effectiveness is secured through parochial activity and a concomitant awareness of participation in the church's apostolate. It is strange that Protestants, who emphasize the priesthood of all believers, are so much more prone than are many Roman Catholics to leave the important question of social action in the hands of pastors and resolution committees. It may not be too late for us to take a leaf from the Roman book.

25. J. H. Nichols, *Democracy and the Churches* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1951), p. 243.