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Apostolate Among Men - Today

GEORGE J. WILLMANN

IN ADDRESSING AN AUDIENCE at Holy Ghost College during his recent memorable visit to Manila, His Eminence Cardinal Gilroy commented that the Communists are not afraid if thousands go to church everyday. But, he added, they begin to worry when the parish priest begins to visit homes and to pay attention to his flock.

To some people whose concept of a good priest is only that he must be always in his convento or his church, faithful to the regular liturgical services and ready to advise any of the faithful who come to the convento for guidance, the words of the distinguished Cardinal might be somewhat startling.

But when he spoke thus, His Eminence, as should be expected, was in no way departing from approved practice and teaching. Frequently, and especially in recent years, the reigning Pontiffs in Rome have urged priests to go to the people, to the marketplace, to the factories, in order to bring Christ to their flocks, just as Our Divine Lord Himself two thousand years ago sought out the people of Judea and Samaria in their homes and their farms and their little fishing villages.

To show the importance of such procedure, our Holy Father, Pope Pius XII in a special decree dated April 11, 1949, established in Rome a pastoral training school for the newly ordained priests and in a later exhortation, directed the establishment of similar institutes in every diocese or at least in every region. In such training schools,

organized as a sequel to the rigorous seminary training in theology, philosophy and kindred subjects, the young priests will learn how to go to the people. The content of our theology does not change with the years. Our dogmas are immutable. But how to bring them to our people, how to adapt our teaching to the constantly changing circumstances of time and place,—that is the difficult problem.

In our own seminary days several decades ago, we had one professor who was particularly admired for his breadth of learning and mental acumen. In the Metaphysics classes, he was relentless in demanding clear-cut definitions and sound syllogisms. But then in addition he would remind us that we still had two big defects, first lack of appreciation of the mental problems of those outside the Catholic fold, and secondly lack of ability to present our dogmas to such persons.

MODERN PROBLEMS

Life and its customs are changing almost daily. The comforts of modern life, the incredible dissemination of the printed word, the radio, the moving pictures and other so-called improvements, are producing profound impact on modern minds. The priest must know his Sacred Scripture and his Summa. But he cannot live or move merely in the abstract. The Mystical Body of Christ cannot be segregated from the world which surrounds it. It is always of its own century, advancing with it day by day, hour by hour, adapting continually its manners, its demeanor to that of the society in which it must operate.

In his *Menti Nostrae*, our Holy Father, Pope Pius XII said:

He [the priest] must promote all those forms of apostolate which today, on account of the special needs of the Christian people, are so very important and urgent...

We are far from holding that the apostolate must not be in keeping with the reality of modern life and that projects adapted to the needs of our time should not be promoted. But since the whole apostolate carried on by the Church is

by its essence under the control of the Hierarchy, new forms must not be introduced save with the Bishop's approval.

We have taken this quotation from an excellent recent book, "The Sociology of the Parish" by Nuesse and Harte, published by Bruce. The same source continues with another quotation from our Holy Father:

When we look at mankind around us, and ask ourselves if it is disposed and ready to receive that (superhuman) reality within itself, unfortunately for many the answer cannot be in the affirmative. The supernatural world has become alien to them; it no longer speaks to them. It is as if the spiritual faculties for knowing such lofty and salutary truths had become atrophied or had died within. Some have tried to explain this state of mind by deficiencies of the Church's liturgy. They believe it would be enough to purify it, to reform it, to give it primacy, in order to see the straying souls of the present day rediscovering the paths of the divine mysteries.

Whoever thinks this way shows he has a very superficial conception of the spiritual anemia and apathy of today. Its roots are much deeper. We have already spoken of this to you the last two years. The progressive exclusion of religion from all areas of social life, the inundation of irreligion in all its forms, the blinding fascination of remarkable achievements in the whole field of material life—have all visibly weakened in many people the readiness and disposition to understand and to assimilate the virtues of the supernatural life, and particularly the mysteries of faith.

Coming to our beloved Philippines, we find the same general situation, with perhaps some added problems peculiarly our own.

PHILIPPINE SITUATION

Recently, the public school system of the Philippines celebrated its golden anniversary. For fifty years, these schools have educated the majority of our children. They have taken them from the farms and the barrios and opened up to them new vistas of life. Concomitantly, other Amer-

ican customs have entered our country. Much of their influence, as that of the public schools, has been good. But religiously, they have not been helpful, to say the least. Religious instruction when permitted has been so hedged around with difficulties that usually it has been practically impossible.

Meanwhile, during these fifty years, due to the poverty of our parishes, Catholic schools have been few and small. While at least in the urban districts of the United States, there is a Catholic school in almost every parish, with the majority of Catholic children in parochial schools, here in the Philippines only five percent of our Catholic children enjoy that blessed privilege.

Many other aspects of, and influences upon, our local life could be uncovered by further discussion and study. But it seems unnecessary in order to establish the thesis. Customs are constantly changing in the Philippines. The somewhat idyllic existence of our three centuries of Spanish domination is no longer with us. Our archipelago is no longer merely an aggregation of quiet little farming and fishing villages. Sociologically and spiritually it is a deeply troubled segment of the world's surface. So now our apostolate, following the directive of our Holy Father in *Menti Nostrae*, must adapt itself to the realities of modern life and the needs of our time. Always, of course, as he insists, under the control of the Hierarchy, with no new forms to be introduced save with the approval of the respective local Ordinary.

But how should this be done?

THE ACTION TO BE TAKEN

The present writer does not feel equipped, nor will he attempt here to make an exhaustive study of how the Church in the Philippines has adapted itself to the modern milieu, nor how it should plan for the future.

In this paper, we will devote the remainder of the space allotted to us to describing some of our experiences in the

Catholic Youth Organization, with emphasis on its Adult Education classes. In doing so, we wish to insist that we are not claiming that this organization, commonly known as the C.Y.O., is superior to other Catholic organizations, nor that its work in recent years has been any better, or even as good as that done by some of the other Catholic groups working for the same glorious objective.

We quote our experiences only to open up the subject with the hope that it may provoke others to more penetrating thought and discussion on this vital problem.

CATHOLIC YOUTH ORGANIZATION

We were influenced in turning our efforts towards the Catholic Youth Organization by two circumstances existing among local Catholics. We noticed first that there was much excellent work being done for the so-called "pious female sex", and much less for boys and young men. That the former is valuable and necessary, none will deny. Undoubtedly those engaged in such works earn countless graces for themselves and their charges by their generosity and self-sacrifice. But we noted too that the age-old tradition that the church is "for women only" was reigning almost unchallenged in many of our towns and barrios.

The second circumstance that we noted was that among the works for boys, a very large proportion was for the very small boys and little attention given to the older lads and young men. We noticed that in almost every municipality and very many barrios, not a year would pass without classes of first communicants approaching the Communion rails like pious little angels. But for many this First Communion was also their last Communion. There was too little follow-up, too little encouragement and instruction to continue this and other pious practices. Within a few years these innocent children reach the dangerous adolescent stage, and then later the full maturity of adult life with all of its temptations and problems. But instead of being trained and encouraged to habitual Catholic practices and frequent reception of the Sacraments,

the Church for most was a place to be visited, if at all, only at the time of the annual town fiesta.

How to bring the influence of the Church to these older lads and young men,—that was the problem. We selected for our instruments the Knights of Columbus and the Catholic Youth Organization. Since the former, due to force of circumstances, is for the present at least largely limited to our better educated men, allow me to explain in these pages our work with the other organization, the C.Y.O., which caters more to our underprivileged boys and young men. We use it only as an illustration of what might be done to follow the Papal directives of bringing the Church to our men, instead of waiting for the men to come to our Church.

The Catholic Youth Organization had its origin in the United States about 30 years ago with the famed Bishop Sheil of Chicago as its founder. Having spread to many American dioceses, it was first established locally, in Manila, about 15 years ago, with the approval of His Excellency, Archbishop O'Doherty. Before and during the war it continued its activities on a moderate scale. In 1950, when the National Catholic Action of the Philippines was reorganized, the Catholic Youth Organization was honored with a mandate from the Hierarchy, establishing it as one of the 11 recognized Catholic Action organizations of the Philippines.

At the present time, there are about twenty CYO units extending from Northern Luzon as far south as Mindanao. Although theoretically including youth of both sexes, the work in the Philippines, with one or two exceptions, has up to the present been limited to activity among boys and young men. Admitting youth of all ages, from small boys of six or seven to young men in their 20's, it has even welcomed into some of its activities older men who might be interested.

PROGRAM OF CYO

Its program is wide and varied. Although the primary objective, of course, is the spiritual welfare of its members, the CYO encourages cultural, social, athletic and other recreational functions which serve to attract and help either soul or body of its members.

In at least one region of the United States, namely, in the archdiocese of Boston, the CYO is an over-all youth agency which comprises groups such as the Catholic Boy Scouts troops, parochial youth clubs, summer camps for boys and all other such Catholic organizations under the aegis of the archdiocese. In the Philippines, however, there has been no attempt at such an over-all coverage. Rather, the emphasis has been to encourage small youth clubs in the municipalities or barrios completely free of centralized control and functioning under the authority of the parish priest of each particular place.

The more common formula of the CYO clubs has been simple. The use of a small piece of land, preferably near the church, is obtained. Two basketball goals are erected. A basketball is provided and like a magnet, attracts the youth of the neighborhood. Games are organized. Leagues are conducted. Friendly contacts are established. Opportunity then is provided for the priest and the interested laymen to encourage the boys and young men to catechetical instruction or religious practices suitable and available at that time and place.

Obviously the priest should not make the mistake of attempting to be the athletic coach or playground director. Usually, if not always, he can find a layman to help him in the athletic activities on a voluntary basis or, if necessary, for a small stipend, which as a "sideline" will supplement the income of his regular employment. Public school teachers often would be excellent for such part-time afternoon work.

The function of the priest rather, is to give or at least supervise the religious instruction and spiritual guidance

of the boys and young men attracted to his orbit. In recent years, we have heard of young priests in Europe who, with episcopal approval, have left their conventos, doffed their sotanas and entered the factories as common laborers, or descended into the grimy depths of the mines to toil in perpetual twilight side by side with other laborers. Their purpose has been to contact people estranged from the Church, learn their problems and, if possible, instruct them with the divine doctrines of our Lord.

Without any such violent effort, here in the Philippines the priest can readily establish contacts among boys and young men by establishing a little basketball club. He does not have to take off his sotana and descend into the mines. Just let him show some interest in the recreational welfare of the youth and spend an hour or two, several times a week, encouraging the basketball activities. He will soon find that the young men who formerly looked at him with indifference or even hostility and perhaps even hurled obnoxious epithets at him as he passed through the market place, will now find him a human being like themselves and will welcome and often seek religious instruction and spiritual guidance.

TESTIMONY OF EXPERIENCE WITH CYO

Will the boys accept the invitation to play in a Catholic recreational center? From countless experiences, we know that they will. Competitive leagues help greatly to attract boys. We have run many small leagues, some big. The biggest was in 1942, when, to our amazement, over 210 teams flocked to our headquarters with their applications.

Remembering that although these games and leagues in themselves can be praiseworthy and wholesome as one species of corporal work of mercy, they are, of course, not our primary objective, which is spiritual. We face the question, "Will the boys and young men also accept religious instruction?" Here again the answer is definitely affirmative. When properly presented, they accept it, they often welcome it, they sometimes seek it.

Again speaking from experience, we have found that they wanted more instruction than we personally had time to give.

We encountered one tough gang of voting-age youth, who within a few weeks changed from trouble makers and policemen-haters to right-hand men of the padre.

On another occasion, we gave a short retreat to a group near Manila. One young fellow, almost by force, brought to the conferences a prize-fighter friend who apparently had rarely set foot in a church. At the end of the three days during which he faithfully attended the conferences, the fighter was asked by his friends, "Ano ang palagay mo?" (What do you think?).

He answered briefly, "Masarap pala!" (It was wonderful.) The poor ignorant pugilist was hungry for spiritual solace and instruction.

Monthly group Communion are very desirable for such groups, with the necessary precaution that all are well instructed and that the human respect element in such group movements does not cause sacrilegious reception of the Sacraments.

Group attendance at Sunday Mass can be urged with instruction on the Holy Sacrifice, to be given by the priest or a capable layman. The young lads can be trained to follow the Mass and join the priest in prayers and congregational singing.

The older fellows sometimes like open forums. But in these beware of the *filósofos*, who can be found in every barrio.

In general we found that once the barriers are removed, older boys and young men are curious, and often yearning for religious knowledge.

ADULT EDUCATION

But as we have said, the suggested program in the CYO is wide and varied. It allows not only the spiritual and athletic, but a broad scope of cultural and social activities. One such work which we highly recommend is an Adult

Educational program. This we have tried in two of our CYO centers and found extremely helpful and also easy to organize. It invites the age group older in general than that attracted by the athletic programs, while at the same time fulfilling the same dual objective. It is not only a corporal work of mercy in itself, but one which makes the poor people friendly to the priest and easily receptive to his spiritual influence.

Such a project, of course, needs organizing. The Adult Education class must be announced in the pulpit or by other ways. Cheap circulars can be printed and distributed in the barrios, with a house to house canvass if necessary. In our latest center, at first we found the people self-conscious, ashamed to admit their ignorance. Some of them, whom we found in their nipa huts puffing smoke at their roosters and squinting at us through the smoke, told us that they were too old now to learn anything like reading and writing.

But our canvassers were not discouraged, and on the opening night our rude benches were well filled. To welcome them, we had a guest speaker. He honored the occasion with a verbosity and bombast that could hardly be equalled on either side of the Pasig River.

Our teachers are not technically trained. We have never had anyone so distinguished as a B.S.E. or a normal graduate on our Adult Education staff. But with the aid of the really excellent manual provided by the government Adult Education bureau, even our untrained teachers were able to do an adequate job. One of them confessed that at first he was much embarrassed, not only from his own lack of experience, but also because he must unmask the ignorance of his class in even the barest rudiments of formal education. He did not want to seem condescending to his unlettered adults. He had been warned that they are very sensitive about their lack of schooling. So at first he merely attempted to win their confidence and make them realize that he only wanted to help their welfare.

As was to be expected, the early lessons were among the hardest, learning the apparently simple letters of the

alphabet. It has been said that the sweetest sound on earth to a man or woman is his or her name, and this our teacher gave as the first assignment. He used blotters, on the soft side of which he deeply traced each individual name. Then he made them follow the lines until they had the feel of it. Some of the older students in their thirties or forties were pitiful to watch as they slowly pushed their hands in these unaccustomed lines and curves. Beads of perspiration dropped on their paper from sheer effort.

But finally a smile came to their faces as they formed the letters of their name. It was deeply rewarding. The young teacher said that he knew now why many educators would rather develop tuberculosis in their underpaid profession than to look for comparatively easier jobs. Gradually, the pupils gained facility and lost their stiffness and assumed their natural poses. They began to feel at home in the class. They were losing their shyness. Everytime a question was asked, they were jumping up and shouting, "I, teacher. . . . I, teacher!"

Soon enough they were given the individual textbooks provided by the Bureau of Adult Education. It was touching to see these grown fellows treasure their little kindergarten books as much as a law student his civil code or a budding medico his textbook of anatomy. They were allowed to take the books home with a warning not to pencil or dirty them. In general, of course, the young students still in their teens had an easier time than the older ones and soon were able to submit well-formed assignments.

But there were exceptions.

One student whom we shall name Pedro presented something of a tragedy. Most punctual of all in the class, he was in his seat everyday at least five minutes before the start of the class. Quiet and shy, he never mingled with the other students. Externally, his appearance was such that he seemed to be the brightest in the class. But in fact, he was at the bottom by a big margin, definitely sub-normal. Our good teacher gave him special attention, would hold his hand and slowly trace just three letters at a time. But in another moment, this would be forgotten.

The poor adults had their own brand of *amor proprio*. Once a week, one period was devoted to music practice. The class had been progressing for a couple of months and was provided with mimeographed copies of songs. They bravely held the mimeographed songs before their eyes. But the teacher had to control himself as he found them pointing to the words of "Philippines, My Philippines" while they were singing a lovely Christmas carol.

In this particular adult education center, our most consoling experience was the popularity of the religion class. In addition to the three R's, our schedule called for a 40-minute period of religion three evenings a week. To our agreeable surprise, a group of young men looking like "canto boys" approached us and said that although many of them felt that they knew enough of reading and writing, they would appreciate the privilege of being allowed to attend only the religion class. Of course, the permission was granted. Within a short time, 26 young fellows were in attendance and showed faithful and intelligent attention at every religion class three times a week. A lesson, that we should not misjudge the poor "canto boys". Many of them are rough diamonds beneath their apparently rude exterior.

There are countless other ways of adapting our Catholic apostolate to our times, many of them, no doubt, quite superior to these little efforts narrated above. These few lines may serve as a reminder of the need so frequently enunciated by our Sovereign Pontiffs, and recently repeated by our distinguished Papal Legate, Cardinal Gilroy, that our priests, if they wish to defeat communism, must go to the people. Not of course to waste time in merely congenial visiting, but mingling with our people in order to win their confidence so that we may more readily bring Christ to them.

Thus the good priest, and the good Catholic Actionist too, will be imitating our Divine Model, the Good Shepherd, Who told us: "What think you? If a man have a hundred sheep and one of them should go astray, doth he not leave the ninety-nine in the mountains and seek that which is gone astray." (Matt. 18:12).