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THE ECUMENICAL INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

BY STEPHANE VALIQUETTE, S.J.

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While Roman Catholicism sees its religious orders being deserted, and perhaps even faced with ultimate extinction, Protestantism is producing a religious order for family groups who seek in the school of poverty, chastity and obedience to learn how better to save the Church and the world. This counter-current merits our attention and I would like to examine it here with you.

In 1954, the second convocation of the World Council of Churches meeting at Evanston, Illinois, expressed the desire to see developed an Ecumenical Institute like that of Bossey in Switzerland. This wish was to be realized in the "American way", though, I believe, in the better sense of the world.

Renovation of the parish: Instead of throwing overboard ecclesial structures, this American team chose rather to renew them. It seemed to them that this renovation must grow from the foundation, that is the congregation or parish. Seeking to reach the Christian living in the world, earning his daily bread, the American Ecumenical Institute directed its efforts, first, towards weekend formation sessions. It would be necessary to offer the Christian a theology for his time, in the language of his day. The Institute selected texts first from the classics, then from contemporaries as Tillich, Bultmann, Bonhoeffer, Rahner, inviting the student to come to grips with them. To draw the maximum profit from this theological refresher, the Institute utilized the latest pedagogical techniques and even dared to create new ones which they styled "imaginal education". The course is now so perfected that the Institute team is invited to give it all over the world, reaching last year an audience of some 60,000. The course now has developed several levels and may be spread over a period of time up to eight weeks. Proof of its quality lies in the fact that several universities have incorporated it into their programmes.

To construct a human world: For a Christian, to hear the Word is inevitably to place himself at the service of his fellowmen. The American Institute was concerned first with the problem of building a more human world. It will try to bring to the task American efficiency. Certain considerations emerge from their experiments and analyses: 1. Every renewal project must be circumscribed in space and time. 2. It is necessary to have the courage to attack the basic community problems but without isolating them from the total context. 3. In any community project all age groups must be represented.

Another principle held by the Ecumenical Institute is that no parish or congregation can solve its problems in isolation. We are in the age of global destiny. Local action is now exposed to the scrutiny of the whole world and must be conducted with this in mind. It can even be hoped that a parish renewal conceived and executed with breadth of view should constitute a valid world experience. Thus they implement this first principle: renovation of the basic cell - the parish, to contribute to the reform of the Church and advancement of the Kingdom.

The West Side, Chicago Project: I mentioned above that the Ecumenical Institute of Chicago had experimented in community renewal. In fact the team did not wish to be simply theorists, but felt the need to do it themselves. They undertook renewal of a poor quarter in Chicago's West Side, with a predominantly black population. They came to realize that respect for the dignity of those whom they wish to help demands that they be intimately involved in the renewal project. The team wished to be the catalyst to induce the coalescence of energies and aspirations of the community, from which will emerge the new social order. Better to accomplish the role of catalyst, the team had decided to establish itself in the quarter to be revived, sharing the lot of the people whom they wish to help. The families who constitute the team earn their living outside the project. The renewal project is a voluntary and supplementary enterprise. As long as the team came to the project from outside they experienced difficulty in being accepted by the beneficiaries. Since they are installed in the quarter, the team has been progressively integrated into the community which now accepts them more freely.

A Lay Family Institute: Moved by the Spirit, the team of the Ecumenical Institute has reached the conclusion that, to bring to a successful end their ambitious enterprise of building a more human world by renewal of the basic structures of the Church, they must form a nucleus of Christians totally engaged in the service of Christ. It has therefore founded a sort of lay institute in which the individuals and families live a common life, sharing their goods and their projects. So it is, that an old Protestant seminary in West Chicago has become a family monastery, which unites some fifty members of the Order, as they call it, for prayer and action. They work outside and contribute their salary to a common fund. The community divides the revenues according to the needs of the members, and delegates the common tasks which are required to run the house efficiently. The West Side community project is evidently the renewal of the quarter in which they dwell.

The Order has already opened other houses in other cities and now numbers some five hundred members. Montreal has recently welcomed the little group which has come to found "a religious house", as it is called in our metropolis. Furthermore, last year the mobile team of the Institute came to give a series of lectures in Montreal, and will do so again this month.

Before closing, I wish to note that this new type of Order accepts Christians from diverse Churches, including Roman Catholics. At present the "agape" replaces the celebration of the Eucharist in their liturgy.

My Conclusions at this time: I have met members of the Order and have read about their objectives and techniques, but I have not gone to Chicago to see the enterprise from within. Let us say that I am at the first phase of my research and that I always wish to share my first impressions.

I will not conceal my admiration for what seems to me a work of the Spirit. The second Vatican Council, in its decree on Ecumenism invites us not "to forget that whatever is achieved by the grace of the Holy Spirit by our separated brethren contributes to our edification". I raise my hat, then, to their contribution towards the creation of a better world. I wish also to stress the part played by the laity. Our brothers of the Ecumenical Institute live this promotion and constitute an impressive witness in the Church and in the world.

Finally, I like this idea that, before throwing overboard the structures that seem atrophied to us, an effort is made to revitalise them. Their effort seem to me to be more constructive and more promising than the attitude of those who leave the structures, slamming the doors in a gesture of despair. I prefer the faith and hope of the former.

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