

Klaus Große Kracht:

Die Stunde der Laien?

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Actio Catholica (Catholic Action) was an attempt, nurtured especially by popes Pius XI (1922–1939) and Pius XII (1939–1958), to hold back the progressive »unchurching« of modern society in the 20th century by enlisting the assistance of Catholic laypeople. While the history of Actio Catholica in some countries has been well examined, historical research has widely neglected its role in Germany for the period spanning the 1920s to the 1950s. The present study seeks to address this lacuna by examining the reception and implementation of the papal guiding principles of Catholic Action in Germany during this time frame while also situating them in the wider context of Actio Catholica's implementation efforts in Western Europe, specifically in France and Italy.

The original papal idea for Actio Catholica, which can be traced back to the pontificate of Pius X (1903–1914), consisted of making greater use of laypeople in order to champion the concerns of the Church within the secularized societies of Western Europe. This plan was not, however, linked to increased autonomy. Instead, laypeople were expected to carry out their assignments under the direct guidance of the Church hierarchy. In Italy, this essentially defensive understanding of Actio Catholica's *modus operandi* was retained until the 1950s. In France, by contrast, new concepts emerged, and theologians as well as active laypeople interpreted Actio Catholica in terms of missionary activity within their own particular environment.

In Germany, the papal appeals were first received somewhat hesitantly. Only after German laypeople had confidently taken up the idea of Catholic Action at the 1928 *Katholikentag* (Congress for Members of the Catholic Church in Germany) did the German bishops more thoroughly engage with the papal guidelines and develop their own concepts for implementing Actio Catholica in the German dioceses. Yet these efforts were pursued only half-heartedly. As a consequence, Actio Catholica initially failed to assert itself vis-à-vis the Catholic associations and confessionally-oriented political parties. This only changed in 1933, when the bishops, confronted with the onset of the Nazi state's repressions against organized lay Catholicism, decided to establish Actio Catholica in Germany according to the Italian example. The Nazi regime's religious policies, however, would not permit this sort of reorganization of lay Catholicism, and by the late 1930s the attempt to establish Catholic Action in Germany had failed definitively.

Notwithstanding this setback, the bishops held fast to their plan to implement Actio Catholica in Germany following the demise of National Socialist rule. After 1945, however, a new model for Catholic initiatives and representative bodies (the so-called Catholic committees) came into being, which originated within the Archdiocese of Cologne and spread outward from there. The episcopate supported these tendencies, which ultimately resulted in the reorganization of the still existing Central Committee of German Catholics in the early 1950s. Other attempts to interpret the ideas of Actio Catholica in terms of greater autonomy

for lay Catholics, such as those that emanated from the Frankfurt region in particular, were not as successful in establishing themselves over the long run.

It is difficult to find reliable quantitative estimates about the scope of Actio Catholica in Germany in terms of formal membership. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that only a few leading personalities of German lay Catholicism in Church and society during the decades between 1920 and 1960 did not come into contact with the papal program for Actio Catholica. This program aimed for a public mobilization of the Catholic population, which through indoctrination and targeted public relations activities was to be mobilized on behalf of the interests of the Church. Demonstrations, petitions, and leaflet campaigns were among the means used by Catholic Action, as were liturgical festivals and religious retreats. Beyond this, a series of piety-intensifying »self-motivational techniques« were intended to cultivate the self-esteem of the activists. In Germany as well as in other countries, Actio Catholica thus constituted a stable and long lasting *dispositif* (M. Foucault) consisting of practical-institutional and subjective identity-shaping elements that deeply influenced more than a generation of leading Catholic opinion makers.