

**A Great Light: The Effect of Modernisation within the Catholic Church in Quebec
on the Development of the Quiet Revolution**

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La Grande Noirceur.¹ This was the term coined to describe the period of Maurice Duplessis' premiership in Quebec. During the Duplessis era, though very few clergymen held elected office, the huge number of Quebecois Catholics ensured that they did not need to hold office in order to have a formative influence on policy developed within that province. Many believed that this intimate relationship between the church and the state was responsible for trapping Quebec in a protracted infancy, as it failed to modernise at the same rate as other parts of North-America.² During the Quiet Revolution of the early 1960s, the Catholic Church was finally forced to release its grip on Quebec, allowing the province to enter the modern world. However, the spark that was to illumine this 'great darkness' was being kindled for decades before it finally burst into flame during the 1960s. Many of the ideas fundamental to the Quiet Revolution were first formulated by lay organizations within the Church itself. Furthermore, the changes implemented during the 1960s in Quebec were protected by modernisation within the global Catholic community. These would prevent any possible return to the sort of ultramontaniam prevalent in Quebec society prior to the Quiet Revolution. Thus, dynamic transformations within the Catholic Church inspired parallel transformations in the structure of Quebec society.

In 1927 Pope Pius XI defined Catholic Action as "the participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy."³ The laity in Quebec jumped at this invitation to take a more active

¹ 'The Great Darkness'

² Francis R. Douglas, Jones, Richard, Smith, Donald B., and Wardhaugh, Robert A. *Destinies: Canadian History Since Confederation*. Seventh ed. (Toronto: Nelson, 2012), 462-464. 462.

³ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Catholic Action," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2016.

role in the work of the system that dominated so much of the public life in their province. Between the 1930s and the 1950s, Specialized Catholic Action organizations directed at involving specific groups of laypeople in the apostolic mission of the Church became extremely popular in Quebec, particularly among the young.⁴ Francois Hertel, a professor at a Jesuit College in Quebec during the 1930s, suggested that the reason for the popularity of Specialized Catholic Action with Quebecois youth was that this generation of young people had grown up during the harsh years of the Great Depression and could not view the world with the complacency of their parents' contemporaries. They were desperate for the chance to effect change in a society whose failings had become only too clear during their lifetime.⁵ According to Hertel, they wanted "the freedom to do good, to sanctify themselves, in the face of conformity."⁶ So the young people of Quebec flocked to Catholic Action groups, because there they were promised the chance to have the sort of impact they craved.

The ultimate mission of Catholic Action groups was to re-create a Christian culture in a world that some within the Church perceived to be degenerating into totalitarianism on the one hand and secular hedonism on the other.⁷ This mission was to be carried out by laypeople who had been trained in Catholic Action groups. The idea was that if young Catholics were to be carefully educated in the faith, they would develop a delicate Catholic sensibility that would allow them to interpret and respond to the circumstances of the modern world on their own account. Thanks to this training, the laity would naturally act in accordance with Church teaching. Thus, they would be empowered to initiate and perform concrete actions that would

⁴ Michael Gauvreau, "From Rechristianization to Contestation: Catholic Values and Quebec Society, 1931–1970," *Church History* 69, no. 4 (2000): 811.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 812.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Tom Truman, *Catholic Action and Politics* (London: Merlin Press, 1960): 62.

have an immediate effect on their society without the direct supervision of the clergy.⁸ Therefore, the premise of Catholic Action contained an implicit critique of the institutional clericalism that had previously enforced Catholic values in Quebec. Underpinning this shift toward greater lay involvement in the apostolate was the philosophy of French personalism.⁹ The personalist philosophy emphasized the dignity of the human person and insisted on the need for a personal and vital Catholic faith to drive positive social change.¹⁰ These qualities were associated in particular with the young. So their pure and vital Catholicism began to be defined in direct opposition to the indifference with which the older generations approached the practice of their faith. This idea of an irreconcilable opposition between the young and the old became a driving force of Catholic Action in its own right as the young began to see themselves as catalysts for a necessary social change that their elders could hardly understand, much less effect.¹¹

However, one of the natural consequences of a movement that operated through organizations composed of only certain sectors of the population was that when a person no longer belonged to a particular demographic, he could no longer be eligible for participation in his former group. While the Specialized Catholic Action movement in Quebec had groups devoted to almost every category of youth, there was one conspicuous exception: young and married professionals.¹² Although no longer able to belong to the Catholic Action movement, the younger members of the middle-class, and in particular the men, still yearned for a way to express their dynamic and intimate conception of the Catholic faith. So, deprived of the structure of Catholic Action groups, they conceived of a number of experimental organizations through

⁸ Indre Cuplinskas, "Doing It Rite: Specialized Catholic Action and Liturgical Renewal in Quebec, 1930s–1960s," *The Catholic Historical Review* 101, no. 1 (2015): 127.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁰ Gauvreau, "Rechristianization," 810.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 811

¹² Michael Gauvreau, *The Catholic Origins of Quebec's Quiet Revolution, 1931-1970* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 49.

which they hoped to propagate the ideas they had encountered during their teenage years. The most influential of these experiments was the journal, *Cité libre*. Almost the entire editorial staff of *Cité libre* had been involved in the Catholic Action movement during their student days and they now used their journal to advocate for a revitalization of religious feeling in Quebec.¹³ However, unlike its more plebeian antecedents, this initiative appealed in a particular way to the cultural and intellectual elites of Quebec. Indeed, one of the core beliefs espoused by the journal was that Catholicism as it was being practiced by the majority of the faithful was, in a practical sense, no better than paganism because it was defined by traditional rituals and not founded upon a personal understanding of the Church's teachings. They believed that this was symptomatic of a crisis of faith in the province and that the most effective remedy for it would be a spiritual revival amongst the young members of Quebec's upper class.¹⁴

However, like the Catholic Action groups before them, the editors of *Cité libre* did not promote a revitalization of the Catholic faith for its own sake; but were also interested in effecting social change. For the editors of *Cité libre*, the aspect of Quebec society that was in most desperate need of reform was the prevailing model of church-state interaction.¹⁵ Using two of the central tenets of the Catholic Action movement, the irreconcilable conflict between generations, and the superiority of a personalist understanding of religion to formulaic piety, they developed a critique of the Duplessis era that would, in large part, inspire the rhetoric of the Quiet Revolution.¹⁶ They believed Duplessis's regime was emblematic of the hollow Catholicism they saw being practiced throughout the province. Therefore, they advocated for a departure from the system that promoted clerical domination in the political life of Quebec. They

¹³ Gauvreau, *The Catholic Origins*, 50.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 56

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 48

believed that a new generation of leaders should replace uncritical obedience to the dictates of the clergy with a sensitive and intellectual response to the problems of the modern world. Nonetheless, their conception of the world would be informed by a thorough understanding of the Church's teachings.¹⁷ Thus, far from demanding a secular state, the *citélibristes* envisioned a society that would be more deeply Catholic. However, according to their model, this Catholic ethos would not be imposed upon the polity by a domineering Church; it would develop organically because the people who guided the creation of state policy would be led by profound, Catholic convictions.

As these ideas reached the community at large through vehicles like *Cité Libre*, Quebec society was caught up in a dramatic cultural and political transformation: the Quiet Revolution. Under the leadership of Premier Jean Lesage, the structure of Quebec's society underwent drastic alteration. A number of the changes implemented aimed at creating the sort of distance between the Catholic hierarchy the state that the *citélibristes* had advocated for. For example, by creating the first provincial ministry of education the Lesage government made the Catholic teaching orders, which had overseen education in Quebec for centuries, redundant. It also gave the government the power to favour the sort of education they thought most necessary for youth who would live in a modern, industrial world. Training in technical careers, like engineering, superseded the classical education provided by the Church. This and other changes like it, took place rapidly during the first years of the 1960s and to many observers this radical upset of the established order appeared to have come without any warning.¹⁸ However, to the attentive analyst of the Quebec situation, it is evident that the liberal ideas developing in Catholic Action

¹⁷ Gavreau, *The Catholic Origins*, 15.

¹⁸ Francis et al., 463.

movements and related organizations like *Cite Libre* had been preparing the ideological environment necessary for these reforms for decades before the Quiet Revolution.

The climax of this transformation in Quebec coincided with a period of radical change within the global Roman Catholic Church. During the Second Vatican Council, convoked in 1962 by Pope John XXIII, the Church as a whole began the process of re-establishing its position in the modern world.¹⁹ It was evident that many Catholics wanted a Church whose structure involved greater cooperation between the clergy and the laity. The nature of the policies developed during the council made it equally apparent that the highest authorities in the Church were ready and willing to develop a model that would allow for just that.²⁰ While creating an atmosphere that provided an opportunity for greater lay involvement in the sacramental life of the Church, the council also articulated the laity's right to participate in Her salvific mission. According to the pronouncements of the council, all the people of the Catholic Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, could help to teach the message of the Gospel.²¹ Thus, the relationship between the clergy and the laity was modified. Where there had once been a dynamic of authority and obedience there was now to be one of collaboration and cooperation.

The development of a model for more equal interaction between the clergy and the laity within the Church was matched by a new philosophy to guide the relationship between Church and state. The old practice, prevalent especially in historically Catholic societies like Quebec, whereby Church authorities could shape the policy of the state by exerting a direct influence on the political choices made by the laity, was unequivocally denounced. The council affirmed that the layperson must have the right to act in the secular sphere according to the dictates of his own

¹⁹ Gregory Baum, *The Church in Quebec* (Outremont, Quebec: Novalis, 1991), 50.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

conscious, free from ecclesiastical interference.²² So, the Church, as defined by the Second Vatican Council, gave its members the freedom to participate fully in the political life of the modern, democratic state.

In Quebec, the Dumont Commission, completed in the early 1970s, employed these new ideas in order to re-define the role of the Catholic Church in the province. The development of a global policy for the democratization of the Church hierarchy meant that any return to a clerical society like that of the previous generation was impossible, even if there were some conservatives who pined for it. However, on the whole, Quebec Catholics were glad to find that official Church policy now agreed with ideas that they had been developing for nearly 40 years. According to the Dumont Commission, the Church was first and foremost a communion.²³ In this communion, the laity and the clergy were called on to support and encourage one another as they strove toward a common goal: salvation. Adapting their behaviour to agree with their new role as a “*compagnon de route*” on the way to heaven the bishops in Quebec, though many were themselves conservative, refrained from suppressing the development of more liberal and experimental pious practices within the parishes of their diocese.²⁴ Similarly, due to the Second Vatican Council’s insistence on the right of the individual to form opinions regarding political issues autonomously, self-professed Catholics could be found to endorse opposing sides of every important question, making it impossible to reduce the “Catholic position” to an absolute opposition to the values of the modern, post Quiet Revolution, society.²⁵ Thus, by adopting the ideology formulated during the Second Vatican Council, the Dumont Commission validated the

²² David Seljak, “Why the Quiet Revolution was ‘Quiet’: The Catholic Church’s Reaction to the Secularization of Nationalism in Quebec after 1960,” *Historical Studies* 62 (1996): 111.

²³ Baum, *The Church in Quebec*, 60.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 64

²⁵ Seljak, “Why the Quiet Revolution was ‘Quiet,’” 118.

more liberal idea of the Church's role in society that had been emerging in Quebec since the development of Catholic Action movements in the 1930s and dismissed any possibility of a return to the sort of clerical society that had been deconstructed during the Quiet Revolution.

A careful inspection of the Catholic Church in Quebec during the Duplessis years reveals that any representation of it as a monolithic institution uniformly opposed to modernisation cannot be accepted. Indeed, many of the ideas that informed the policy of the Quiet Revolution were first formulated in organizations composed of Quebec's lay population, and especially of the young, Catholic Quebecois. Furthermore, the changes made in Quebec during the Quiet Revolution were safeguarded by modernisation within the global Catholic Church. So, the 'great darkness' of ultramontanist in Quebec was not dispelled by a sudden flash of light at the beginning of the 1960s. The spark that burst into flame during the Quiet Revolution had been struck within the Church itself.

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