

CA MYANMAR Golden Jubilee

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Excellencies, reverend fathers, brothers and sisters, first of all I want to thank you for your graceful welcome. I was in your country some years ago, precisely in 1997 and 1999, I had the possibility to meet Mons Giovanni Battista Gobbato who can be considered one of the fathers of Catholic faith in your country. He proposed also a way to laity to be active in the Ecclesial community: Catholic Action. It was 50 years ago when he started such ecclesial experience among you and today we celebrate together such extraordinary event.

Pope Francis, during his meeting with representatives of different Catholic Action in the world in 2017 in Rome gave us the guidelines for a Catholic Action which can face the challenges of this time.

He said that *“Historically, the mission of Catholic Action has been to form lay people to assume their specific responsibility in the world. Today, in effect, it is the formation of missionary disciples. Catholic Action’s charism is the charism of the Church herself, profoundly incarnate in the here and now of every diocesan Church, as she attentively contemplates and discerns the life of her people and seeks new ways to evangelize and carry out her mission, beginning with the different parish situations.*

The post synodal document *Ecclesia in Asia* talking about evangelization declares: *The Church is convinced that deep within the people, cultures and religions of Asia there is a thirst for "living water" (cf. Jn 4:10-15), a thirst which the Spirit himself has created and which Jesus the Saviour alone can fully satisfy. The Church looks to the Holy Spirit to continue to prepare the peoples of Asia for the saving dialogue with the Saviour of all. Led by the Spirit in her mission of service and love, the Church can offer an encounter between Jesus Christ and the peoples of Asia as they search for the fullness of life. In that encounter alone is to be found the living water which springs up to eternal life, namely, the knowledge of the one true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent (cf. Jn 17:3).(18)*

And we, as Catholic Action members, are active part of the Church so we can be those tools, instruments to allow people to meet the Saviour

Pope Francis continued:

Traditionally, Catholic Action has had four pillars or feet on which it moves: Prayer, Formation, Sacrifice and Apostolate. At different periods in its history, it has put one of these feet first and let the others follow. Given the needs of the present time, the apostolate should be the distinctive feature and it should move first. Not to the detriment of the other realities, but on the contrary, to enable them to move forward too. The missionary apostolate calls for prayer, formation and sacrifice.

Form: by offering a process of growth in faith, an ongoing mission-oriented catechetical programme adapted to every situation, based on the Word of God, with the aim of fostering a joyful friendship with Jesus and an experience of fraternal love.

Pray: with that holy “extroversion” that opens your hearts to other people’s needs, their sufferings and their joys – a prayer that makes you go forth and takes you far. In this way, you will avoid constant self-concern. As Catholic Action members we need to be aware of our calling and prayer cannot be other than a continuous link, to use a modern word, with Jesus, our Saviour the source, the spring of our faith, he who gives a meaning to our life. What would be our life, what would be our faith without his resurrection? We are living this Easter time accompanied by his encouragement, his explanations, his reflections given to his disciples to support their mandate to bring their witness in every part of the world. And we are his disciples today and, we too, are encouraged to be his faithful witnesses. We cannot use prayer for personal consolation, to find a sort of peaceful state of mind. The word of God is a sword which cuts violently our life and obliges us to react, in a positive way of course, and to share our faith joyfully. Pope Francis is an extraordinary example of this serene and joyful witness. Mgr Gobbato, in a certain way, anticipated such mandate encouraging lay people from your region to be active protagonists in the life of the local church.

In *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis says “Spirit-filled evangelizers are evangelizers who pray and work. Mystical notions without a solid social and missionary outreach are of no help to evangelization, nor are dissertations or social or pastoral practices which lack a spirituality which can change hearts. These unilateral and incomplete proposals only reach a few groups and prove incapable of radiating beyond them because they curtail the Gospel. What is needed is the ability to cultivate an interior space which can give a Christian meaning to commitment and activity. There is always the risk that some moments of prayer can become an excuse for not offering one’s life in mission; a privatized lifestyle can lead Christians to take refuge in some false forms of spirituality.”

Sacrifice: not simply to feel more pure – a generous sacrifice is one that benefits others. Offer your time in trying to help others grow; offer what you have in your pockets and share it with those who have less; offer the gift of your personal vocation generously to embellish our common home and help it to grow..... For Catholic Action, mission is not one task among others: it is the task. The charism of Catholic Action is to advance the Church’s pastoral activity. Unless mission is its distinctive strength, Catholic Action will lose its true nature and its reason for existing. As we know the first to receive the novelty of resurrection were the women who, hurried early in the morning went to the sepulchre and Mary was asked by her Master Saviour to go and tell his disciples about his resurrection. They are the first missionaries of the risen Jesus. Pope Francis has declared Saint Mary Magdalene apostle of the apostles

It is essential to renew and modernize the commitment of Catholic Action to evangelization. The aim must be to reach everyone, everywhere, on all occasions, and in every existential periphery, in reality and not just in principle. ... Catholic Action must take up the overall mission of the Church, with a sense of generous membership in the diocesan Church, starting with the parish.

The mission of the universal Church is renewed in each particular Church in its own particular way. So too, Catholic Action takes on true vigour by responding to, and making its own, the pastoral outreach of each diocesan Church, through concrete forms of participation that start from the parishes.

Catholic Action must provide the diocesan Church with a mature laity that readily supports pastoral projects everywhere as a way of realizing its vocation. You need to be incarnate in concrete ways.... All Catholic Action members are missionaries in action. Children evangelize children, young people

other young people, adults other adults, and so on. No one shows the joy of the life of faith more effectively than a peer... I desire a Catholic Action present among people: in the parish, in the diocese, in towns and in neighbourhoods, in the family, in offices and workplaces, in the countryside, in all spheres of life. These are the new places where decisions are made and culture is created... Everyone can be a part, starting with what they have and what they can do.

This is the concrete people that you are to form. With this concrete people, and for this concrete people, you are to pray."

The Plan – an outgoing Catholic Action – passion for Christ, passion for our people

"... Going forth means openness, generosity, meeting reality outside the four walls of organizations and parishes. This means giving up trying to exercise undue control and to programme results. That freedom is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, and it will help you to grow.

Catholic Action's plan of evangelization should follow these steps: take initiative, get involved, accompany, bear fruit and celebrate. Move forward a step at a time, become a part of things and advance together. This is already something to celebrate. Pass on the joy of your faith, the joy you feel when evangelizing, in season and out of season.

Encourage your members to value chance, face-to-face missionary encounters, or those starting from the missionary activity of the community.

Catholic Action is an immense responsibility. It demands fidelity and consistency to what the Church points us to at every period of her history, without remaining anchored to past forms as if they were the only ones possible. Fidelity to your mission entails the flexibility that marks those who have one ear attuned to the people and the other to God."

There is an African proverb which states "if you want to be the first run alone, if you want to go far in the distance run together" it is very appropriate for Catholic Action members, one of the characteristics of our association is the unity of the structure. Another element we need to consider is "the culture in which we are merged since it is the vital space within which the human person comes face to face with the Gospel. Just as a culture is the result of the life and activity of a human group, so the persons belonging to that group are shaped to a large extent by the culture in which they live. As persons and societies change, so too does the culture change with them. As a culture is transformed, so too are persons and societies transformed by it. From this perspective, it becomes clearer why evangelization and inculturation are naturally and intimately related to each other. The Gospel and evangelization are certainly not identical with culture; they are independent of it. Yet the Kingdom of God comes to people who are profoundly linked to a culture, and the building of the Kingdom cannot avoid borrowing elements from human cultures. Thus Paul VI called the split between the Gospel and culture the drama of our time, with a profound impact upon both evangelization and culture.

In the process ... the Church not only transmits her truths and values and renews cultures from within, but she also takes from the various cultures the positive elements already found in them. This engagement with cultures has always been part of the Church's pilgrimage through history. But it has a special urgency today in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural situation of Asia, where Christianity is still too often seen as foreign.

Moreover, since the inculturation of the Gospel involves the entire People of God, the role of the laity is of paramount importance. It is they above all who are called to transform society, in collaboration with the Bishops, clergy and religious, by infusing the "mind of Christ" into the mentality, customs, laws and structures of the secular world in which they live. A wider inculturation of the Gospel at every level of society in Asia will depend greatly on the appropriate formation which the local Churches succeed in giving to the laity.

This is a calling to all of us as lay people. And I think bishop Gobbato wanted to make as many people from your country as possible aware of this calling. Such calling is described by Pope Francis in his apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exultate* in which he encourages us to live our calling to holiness in our normal daily life.

Here are some of his words: "I like to contemplate the holiness present in the patience of God's people: in those parents who raise their children with immense love, in those men and women who work hard to support their families, in the sick, in elderly religious who never lose their smile. In their daily perseverance I see the holiness of the Church militant. Very often it is a holiness found in our next-door neighbours, those who, living in our midst, reflect God's presence".

8. Let us be spurred on by the signs of holiness that the Lord shows us through the humblest members of that people which "shares also in Christ's prophetic office, spreading abroad a living witness to him, especially by means of a life of faith and charity". We should consider the fact that, as Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross suggests, real history is made by so many of them. As she writes: "The greatest figures of prophecy and sanctity step forth out of the darkest night. But for the most part, the formative stream of the mystical life remains invisible. Certainly the most decisive turning points in world history are substantially co-determined by souls whom no history book ever mentions. And we will only find out about those souls to whom we owe the decisive turning points in our personal lives on the day when all that is hidden is revealed".

10. All this is important. Yet with this Exhortation I would like to insist primarily on the call to holiness that the Lord addresses to each of us, the call that he also addresses, personally, to you: "Be holy, for I am holy" (*Lev 11:44*; cf. *1 Pet 1:16*). The Second Vatican Council stated this clearly: "Strengthened by so many and such great means of salvation, all the faithful, whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord – each in his or her own way – to that perfect holiness by which the Father himself is perfect".

11. "Each in his or her own way" the Council says. We should not grow discouraged before examples of holiness that appear unattainable. There are some testimonies that may prove helpful and inspiring, but that we are not meant to copy, for that could even lead us astray from the one specific path that the Lord has in mind for us. The important thing is that each believer discern his or her own path, that they bring out the very best of themselves, the most personal gifts that God has placed in their hearts (cf. *1 Cor 12:7*), rather than hopelessly trying to imitate something not meant for them. We are all called to be witnesses, but there are many actual ways of bearing witness. Indeed, when the great mystic, Saint John of the Cross, wrote his *Spiritual Canticle*, he preferred to avoid hard and fast rules for all. He explained that his verses were composed so that everyone could benefit from them "in his or her own way". For God's life is communicated "to some in one way and to others in another".

12. Within these various forms, I would stress too that the "genius of woman" is seen in feminine styles of holiness, which are an essential means of reflecting God's holiness in this world. Indeed, in

times when women tended to be most ignored or overlooked, the Holy Spirit raised up saints whose attractiveness produced new spiritual vigour and important reforms in the Church. We can mention Saint Hildegard of Bingen, Saint Bridget, Saint Catherine of Siena, Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. But I think too of all those unknown or forgotten women who, each in her own way, sustained and transformed families and communities by the power of their witness.

I want to finish addressing you the wish expressed by Pope Francis in his document:

Let us “give our all and embrace that unique plan that God willed for each of us from eternity: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you” (*Jer 1:5*).

So, also interpreting bishop Gobbato wish 50 years ago when he encouraged some lay people to give form to Catholic Action, be holy according to God’s calling. This is also my wish for each of you and God bless you all.