

## REFLECTIONS ON CATHOLIC ACTION

### Introduction

I would like to start with three observations:

I. **An invitation to hope:** "God has prepared a new springtime for the Gospel". "If we look superficially at our world, we are impressed by the many negative facts which can lead to pessimism. But this is an unjustified feeling; we have faith in God the Father and the Lord ... who is preparing a great Christian spring whose beginning we can already see "(RM 86). CA must express this hope and encourage the flowering of this new spring

II **An urgent call for an ecclesial commitment:** "The time has come to undertake a new evangelization" (CFL 34). Lay faithful are the protagonists of this new evangelization. CA is particularly called to be so because of its intrinsic call to an ecclesial commitment.

I. **A proposal for a communal journey:** the Spirit of God is recreating CA within a Church, which is a mystery of missionary communion:  
a - **Mystery:** an itinerary and school of holiness;  
b - **Communion:** with the Pastors, with the rest of the People of God, with the other associations ...  
c - **Mission:** presence, announcement, sending off *ad gentes*;  
with sincere fidelity to Christ, to the Church, to man;  
in profound ecclesial communion with the hierarchy;  
with particular missionary dynamism;  
with special openness to the different CA associations in other countries, always keeping the fundamental disposition of union with the local Church in communion with Peter;  
with an ever growing evangelical and ecclesial presence in the world, a special kind of Church: a "universal sacrament of salvation".

### I - A look at history

I.1 -Particularly, during the first half of the XX century, the associative, spiritual and apostolic aggregation of the laity in the Church focused on the promotion and development of CA. The reference to CA already emerges during the pontificate of Pius IX and the First Vatican Council and is used to include many different initiatives, works and associations of the so-called "Catholic movement" of the end of the last century / beginning of the current one. We know that this developed a more precise orientation and structure during the pontificate of Pius XI, who considered this a "providential inspiration".

This Pope - called "The Pope of Catholic Action" – because of the numerous documents published and of the initiatives undertaken for its development - was also the "Pope of the missions"; both titles point at a growing need for evangelization in the face of the challenges

posed by "de-Christianization" and the new forms of inculturation and of the presence of Christianity.

The development of Catholic Action can be considered as one of those **"reform movements"** which, without proposing it or knowing it, **"prepared the way"** for the Second Vatican Council. There is an interpenetration between this development of Catholic Action and the liturgical, ecclesiological, ecumenical renewal etc. movements. The ecclesiological reflections - and those on the "theology of the laity" from the 1930s to the 1960s- presuppose and explicitly refer to Catholic Action. Catholic Action **has helped to rediscover and realize the vocation and dignity of the laity in the Church**, the most radical and full meaning of the sacraments of Christian initiation for all the baptized, the concept of the "common priesthood", the participation of the people in the liturgy, the renewed self-awareness of the Church as the Body of Christ and the People of God and a more active belonging and the sense of joint responsibility in Christian communities.

From all this, we can conclude that Catholic Action, in the diversity of its forms, has put a solid foundation and has been a school which has spread formation, participation and the promotion of the laity in the life and mission of the Church *"Be Church!"* (Pius XII). In it, generations of lay militants, with a strong awareness of ecclesial fidelity, were forged. It also produced Catholic leaders in diverse ecclesial and secular spheres.

### **1.2- The Second Vatican Council has taken up and crowned this associative tradition of**

**Catholic Action.** In the various phases of its preparation and realization, difficulties and misunderstandings were not lacking and much debate took place about it. There was a variety of conceptions and positions, to the point that, in the preparatory texts "innumerable difficulties" were reported until a clear agreement was reached. This was also reflected in the debates in the Conciliar Hall. In the end a clear, encouraging but flexible decision was taken to embrace different realities according to the diversity of the forms in churches of different contexts and traditions.

In the dynamism of the "promotion of the laity", in the light of the renewed *ecclesiology of communion*, the "associated apostolate of the faithful" is strongly recommended and the "organized forms of the lay apostolate" ,as an adequate response to the "human and Christian needs of the faithful", and at the same time, a sign of communion and unity of the Church in Christ (cf AA 18), the Second Vatican Council emphasized the importance of Catholic Action and its characteristic features (cf AA 20, 21). It stressed the combined and simultaneous possession of these four notes:

- the apostolic aim of the Church
- the responsibility of the laity in the running of these organisations
- the organic nature of communion
- the direct collaboration with the Pastors - under the higher direction of the hierarchy

## II - Looking to the future starting from the richness of the present

II.1. - Now we are witnessing a new stage of renewal. It is the need for "communion and collaboration" - as *Christifideles laici* states - in a multi-faceted fabric of associative experiences, within which Catholic Action must deepen its typical profile, its originality, its particular characteristics. (CFL 31).

Another important aspect to take into account is that of the profound changes that have taken place **through a wider, more widespread and diversified participation of the faithful** in the life of particular Churches and communities. "Pastoral plans" have been drawn up, new pastoral and consultative structures - pastoral councils, lay councils, local Synods, basic ecclesial communities ... development of non-ordained ministries, a variety of initiatives and systems, new initiatives ... In this new scenario, Catholic Action has also had to work harder on its animation, formation and stimulation programs.

The growing dechristianization has posed new challenges to the Church, requiring a deeper understanding of its **missionary nature** and a **more participatory and effective evangelization**. Certain Catholic Action realities relied on people who mostly continued to confess they were Christian, without a greater commitment towards a deeper and more mature faith. The Council was primarily a missionary event. Paul VI left as a testament the extraordinary *Evangelii nuntiandi* and John Paul II never tires of proclaiming a "new evangelization". **Catholic Action is challenged to demonstrate its missionary spirit**, its indispensable contribution to the missionary plan of the whole Church, the evangelizing charism that it has had right from its origin and which must now be expressed in the new prevailing social and cultural conditions.

II. 2. - Within the new participatory structure of communion in the Church and of the pluriformity of associative modalities, what is Catholic Action's identity, originality, novelty and its particular contribution to the edification and mission of the Christian community? To answer this question, one has to proceed with a re-reading and a deepening of the known characteristics indicated by the Council. I believe above all, that the notes "A" and "D", as the basis of the uniqueness of Catholic Action in the Church today in accordance with its tradition, should be given more importance.

A - (ECCLESIALITY) "*The immediate aim*" of Catholic Action is in effect "*the apostolic aim of the Church*" which is to evangelize and sanctify men and to form their conscience in a Christian way, so that they can imbue the various communities and different environments (AA 20, a). **Catholic Action is not defined, like other associations, by specific aims**, such as specific apostolic goals or environments, carrying out works of mercy or charity, special education pedagogies, specific spiritualities ... It establishes its identity on the same apostolic aim as the Church. This apostolic aim is the mission of evangelizing as this contributes to the building of the Church, as the sacrament of salvation and unity of the human race. Thus, this concrete general aim translates itself and is in effect enculturated through the pastoral journey of the Christian communities guided by their Pastors. For this

reason, Catholic Action is defined more concretely by **the pastoral priorities and objectives of the particular Church in which it is inserted, taken in their totality and from their organic and daily aspects.**

We can conclude by saying that Catholic Action's aim is the daily and organic building of the ecclesial community at the service of men. This is how Paul VI defined it on the April 25, 1977: "**CA is called to realize a singular form of lay ministry, aimed at the *plantatio ecclesiae* and the development of the Christian community, in close union with the ordained ministries**". This same definition was taken up by John Paul II in his speeches at the Fourth Assembly of Italian Catholic Action (10/27/80), at the 5th Assembly (8/12/83) and at the 6th Assembly (25/6/86) ...

From all this we can deduce that Catholic Action is essentially and organically **at the service of the local Church and of its pastoral project.**

Catholic Action never wanted to assume an international superstructure. Basing on its affective and effective communion with the successor of Peter, its fields of action and places of insertion turn out to be above all the diocese and the parishes, where the most varied components of the people of God are expressed in unity. Its theological place is the Christian community, centred in the Eucharist, in the Word of God, in the growth of the faith of the baptized and in the irradiation of charity. If the *plantatio ecclesiae* is necessary in all environments - hence the importance of "sectors" or "specializations" - Catholic Action can never lose its organic unity and its "popular" bond (namely the manifestation of the People of God and its specific ministry as its journey's aim).

In this "new evangelization", Catholic Action is particularly called to undertake "the formation of mature ecclesial communities, in which faith might radiate and fulfil the basic meaning of adherence to the person of Christ and his Gospel, of an encounter and sacramental communion with Him, of an existence lived in charity and in service" (CFL 34). "Through evangelization the Church is built up into a *community of faith*: more precisely, into a community that *confesses* the faith in full adherence to the Word of God which is *celebrated* in the Sacraments, and *lived* in charity, the principle of Christian moral existence. In fact, the "good news" is directed to stirring a person to a conversion of heart and life and a clinging to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour; to disposing a person to receive Baptism and the Eucharist and to strengthen a person in the prospect and realization of new life according to the Spirit" (CFL 33).

B. - (ORGANICITY AND COLLABORATION WITH THE HIERARCHY) Another distinctive feature of the Catholic Action is its *close, organic communion*, its distinctive availability, with the hierarchy. This is double sided. On the one hand, on the part of the hierarchy, Catholic Action is recognized, authenticated and more closely associated with the building and the development of the Church. Bishops are pastors of the whole flock. They discern all the charisms and all these promote communion of truth and charity. But the Bishops have the right and the need to involve more closely some collaborators, just like those men and women who collaborated more closely with the apostles in the work of evangelization and worked so hard for the Lord. Besides, Catholic Action is specific and it is committed to

answer to an urgent need, which means, greater responsibility and not a mere "privileged" relationship with the hierarchy.

Catholic Action is a public association par excellence. This relationship is characterized by the "superior direction of the hierarchy". This applies to all associations and movements but for Catholic Action this has a special connotation. It is the hierarchy which establishes the general framework and the objectives which Catholic Action makes its own. The Code also gives it the powers to intervene in the associative life.

However, this does not mean that the responsibility of its lay leaders and the free initiatives of its associates are somehow restrained.

C. - (ITS LAY CHARACTER) Another fundamental element that characterizes Catholic Action is its **tradition of the Christian formation** of its members and its pedagogical irradiation within the whole People of God, through its inclusion in the parishes and the dioceses. Catholic Action does not draft for itself a specific program of formation but collaborates in the general catechesis of Christian communities. Its formative service is especially addressed to all the components of the People of God, through various itineraries and it strives to be integral, organic, evolutionary and includes spiritual, theological, apostolic, pastoral and human formation. If the recipients are above all the laity, Catholic Action promotes in a special way all the vocations that are indispensable and enrich the People of God.

II.3. - These are only some reflections related to our common roots, to the great and noble tradition wherein we recognize ourselves, to our spiritual, ecclesial, apostolic associative identity, which is proper to Catholic Action.

All this is the fruit of the specific charism we have received.

**Yes, Catholic Action's charism!** Did not Pius XI refer to a "providential inspiration" at the service of the Church? Those roots and traditions do not simply apply for the "works" which Catholic Action performs, but for the gifts of the Holy Spirit which animate and guide it, which result in a formation and a new life for "lay faithful" and which characterize deeply Catholic Action's style, service and work. Now, these roots, traditions and identity, which are particular to Catholic Action, have been lived in many different ways in the various local Churches, in parishes, in dioceses and in nations.

Although the Italian Catholic Action has always been looked upon as an example, was the first to be established and is the one closest to the successive Pontiffs and to their orientations, we cannot speak of a uniform "model" of Catholic Action. We can say that it has undergone a process of "inculturation" in the various social, cultural and ecclesial realities in which it was promoted and in which it has developed as a valuable associative expression and as an irradiation of catechetical and apostolic Christian presence.

However, you realize that you are strongly united through your common roots, traditions and identity but different in your ways and in your particular organizational forms. Referring to Catholic Action, we can speak of unity in pluriformity. Maybe, this could be explained by underlining the Pontifical Magisterium on Catholic Action as the fundamental basis of its

unity and the incorporation of Catholic Action in the local Churches as the demonstration of its multiformity.

### III. -The Forum

**III.1** - In this indissociable dialectic between the universality and the localization proper to the Catholic Church, I would like to end with an explicit reference to this Forum, to the International Forum of Catholic Action.

From the very genesis of this initiative, the PCL supported it with enthusiasm and hope. We saw it as a sign and a premise for the revival of Catholic Action in the universal Church. This was already evident during the "experimental" period and more so now when it is in full expansive force.

It was not by chance that the initiative began to take shape during the VII World Assembly of the Synod of Bishops and developed in the light of the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici* (cf *CFL* 31). Is this not a glaring synthesis of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council on the laity, a discernment of its implementation during the first post-conciliar years and the organic and orientational framework for a revival of the participation of all the laity in the life and mission of the Church?

III 2 - We could also say that the International Forum inaugurates a stage of greater openness and encounter of Catholic Action Groups at universal level. International openings and contacts were never lacking. However, every Catholic Action at its national level, maintained only sporadic ties with other "National Catholic Action Groups".

Perhaps this was accentuated by the difficulties experienced during the first post-conciliar phase which was a period of crisis and trials. At that time, while other ecclesial associations and movements assumed an international articulation and dynamism and strengthened their protagonism, Catholic Action was only working at national levels.

And this in an increasingly socialized and interdependent world, in that surprising extension of the universality of the Church and in the face of international events which were increasingly more significant and relevant. Even for the PCL itself, it was difficult to have Catholic Action as an interlocutor at international level. Good and fruitful relations with the Italian Catholic Action, with that in Spain and Argentina were not lacking ... but when it came to international events and organizations, in the list of ICO and ecclesial movements, Catholic Action, as a unitary reality and as an asset of the universal Church, was missing.

III.3 – So this Forum is most welcomed! On a universal level it is called to express the renewed vitality of a tradition which presents itself as an associative and apostolic proposal for all the Churches ...

For those young, missionary Churches which need an adult laity so that the Christian community is fully formed and is a more transparent witness of the communion of which it is a sacrament.

For those Churches in which many Pastors continue to be disconsolate to say: "we have good lay people, but not a laity".

We certainly know that in Catholic Action's history, the idea of an international super-organism, which gives directives to local and national associations, has always been rejected. This would have distorted that which is characteristic and distinctive in the common tradition of every "Catholic Action" which is its beneficial obedience to the local hierarchy (Diocesan Ordinaries, Episcopal

Conferences) and its direct, prompt and faithful orientation of its service to the pastoral guidelines and programs of its hierarchy.

Thus, it is important that the Forum is only this, a "forum", a place of encounter, exchange, collaboration and promotion of the Catholic Action, without falling into the temptation of constituting a super-directive structure. This is the spirit which has guided the PCL as regards the regulatory framework of the Forum and which you are studying and will doubtlessly understand and accept.

#### CONCLUSION

We are going through a providential time of profound renewal - in the Spirit - of CA:

- for new challenges
- for a new awareness of a Church which is missionary communion
- for the Pope's urgent appeal for a new evangelization.

May an authentic obedient love to the Pope and to the Pastors guide us.

May the Holy Spirit guide us.

May Mary, our Mother and Mother of the Church, "Star of Evangelization" and the first and exemplary disciple of the Lord be with us always.

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