The journey of CA in the Church and in the world

For the new evangelization in the light of Christifideles Laicis

Card. Eduardo F. PIRONIO

May the God of hope bring you such joy
and peace in your faith
that the power of the Holy Spirit
will remove all bounds to hope
(Rom 15,13)

These are my first words of welcome and good wishes to all of you who are taking part in this assembly of the International Forum of Catholic Action. I wish that the Holy Spirit may transform the depths of our hearts to bring about an abundance of peace, joy and hope. This hope "which does not deceive because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given us (*Rom* 5,5.)

In my reflections for the Forum that was held in 1991 I invited you to share in this hope, through the words of Pope John Paul II. "God is preparing a great springtime of Christianity and we can already see its first signs." (*RM* 86) This hope which opens up our hearts towards new horizons, new commitments, new steps forward on the path of evangelization and mission of Catholic Action.

One of the signs of this great springtime is the self-awareness that the church has been gaining through all her members: lay people, priests and religious. The Church as Mystery, as Communion, as Mission; or to use one of my favourite expressions which puts it so precisely, "The Church as a mystery of missionary communion".

The recent Synod on Consecrated Life brought us to the conclusion of a beautiful reflection on 'the circular nature of communion': this reflection began with the Synod on the Laity in 1987 and continued through the Synod on Priestly Formation in 1990 – priests who live, serve and communicate the Mystery – and it ends now with a reflection (contemplative meditation) on this gift of God to his Church which is consecrated life. That includes all the various forms of religious life and secular institutes, monastic life and apostolic life, virgins and hermits and new forms of consecrated life. The Spirit of God is working with might in his Church "in this magnificent and dramatic moment of history on the threshold of the third millennium" (*ChL* 3).

Another sign of this "great spring of Christianity" is the growing number of lay faithful who are taking part in the evangelising mission of the Church. Their profound longing for a deep lay spirituality (hunger for the Word of God – Lectio divina – and for the sacraments) their growing commitment to take part in the building up of the Christian community and the construction of a new society.

Among these positive signs of hope we can see especially the impact that the celebrations of World Youth Day has had on young people. These are a key moment of evangelization, a concrete and clear sign of ecclesial communion and a special invitation to personal renewal (which is shown through an increased desire for holiness and in many cases, a decisive moment for the choice of priestly or religious vocations.)

Finally I would like to place among these clear signs of Christian hope a new and deeper awareness of Catholic Action as a privileged form of ecclesial association "in close relationship with the hierarchy" and especially involved in its apostolic mission.

It was not by chance that the Second Vatican Council reminded the Bishops of their duty to promote the different forms of lay apostolate, "and in particular Catholic Action." (*CD* 17, cf. *AA* 20) Pope John Paul said the same thing as he accepted proposal 13 of the Synod Fathers: "among the different forms of lay apostolate which have a particular relationship with the hierarchy the Synod Fathers have singled out various movements and associations of Catholic Action" (*ChL* 31)

It is clear that Catholic Action – with its different methods according to the different countries and cultures where it is present – has deeply influenced the beginnings of lay participation in the mission of the Church and has started up a special form of association that has led to the growth and the maturing of the Christian community.

Without taking anything away from the strength of witness and evangelization of other new ecclesial movements – which "represent a true gift of God both for the new evangelization and for missionary activity properly so called" (*RM* 72) – we must not forget that "it was in particular the promotion of Catholic Action by Pope Pius XI that opened up a decisive chapter in the development of lay activity in the spheres of religious, social, cultural, political and even economic life. The historical experience and the doctrinal studies of Catholic Action prepared new recruits, opened up new horizons and kindled new flames" (John Paul II 21.9.94).

On the journey of Catholic Action there have been moments of darkness and light, moments of fatigue and loss of direction, fears of being overtaken by changing times and ecclesial standards. I believe that the Spirit has sent us this providential moment for the deepest renewal of our spiritual, doctrinal, apostolic and missionary commitment.

The celebration of this Forum will undoubtedly contribute to this renewal – and I shall return to this point later in my address. This Forum aims to involve other countries in the rich experience of association which has borne so much fruit and is so full of hope. I wish to stress, in the light of *Christifideles Laici*, some of the requirements and hopes on this journey of Catholic Action: formation, communion, audacity and prophecy in the Spirit.

I. Formation for a new evangelization

It has always been said that Catholic Action should be a "school of formation". And experience has shown that this is so. Generations of lay people have been formed in the deepest sense of the word by the school of Catholic Action: profoundly christian families, priestly and religious vocations, committed lay people in the fields of culture, education, economics and politics have emerged from this school. Sometimes however, Catholic Action has been accused of being merely "a school", of being closed in on itself, of forming people with a detached spirituality (lacking a direct relationship with daily life and with the commitments of the real world). It has been accused of being simply a doctrinal structure (an abstract theology, not lacking in depth but in ties to personal, family or community situations.) I think these accusations have often been unfounded, but I think there is an element of truth in them, as there is with regards to the formation provided in seminaries and religious institutes. For this very reason there has been a new emphasis in the last three synods – for lay people, priests and religious – on an integral, fundamental and permanent formation.

Formation for the new evangelization requires:

a: formation for communion.

The Church is essentially a missionary communion. For Catholic Action this means first of all real and effective communion with its pastors; like every experience of communion it is sometimes to be found wanting but it is always a rich and rewarding experience. It means communion with all the diverse members of God is people (priests, religious and lay people). And it means a particular ecclesial sensitivity towards and capacity for communion with the other forms of association: movements, groups and so on.

b: formation for an interior unity between faith and life:

so that the message of Christ can be expressed through witness, through evangelization and the promotion of our fellow human beings, and the service of prophecy and missionary action through contemplative prayer.

c: formation for the construction of mature ecclesial communities (ChL 34): communities of faith confessed through obedience to the Word of God, celebrated through the sacraments and lived in the spirit of charity as the soul of a moral Christian existence (cf *ChL* 33).

d: formation in the social doctrine of the Church: "a more precise knowledge of the social doctrine of the Church is vital…..this doctrine must be present in general catechetical instruction and in specialised gatherings as well as in schools and universities" (*ChL* 60). The social doctrine of the Church is part of moral theology (cf *SR* 5).

e: formation for a personal growth on the journey that leads towards holiness. Let us return to a theme which applies specifically to Catholic Action: to be a "school of spirituality and of holiness". The world today needs saints. Everyday saints (Paul VI).

II. Communion for the new evangelization

Communion is the beginning and the end of the new evangelization. "Communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion" (*ChL* 32.) I would say that it is the centre, the heart of the new evangelization for two reasons:

a – because evangelization means the Word and the Eucharist

b – because the Holy Spirit (which is a spirit of love, unity and communion) is "The Protagonist of mission" (*RM* V.) "Church communion is therefore a gift, a great gift of the Holy Spirit." (*ChL* 20)

I wish to refer now to communion as the beginning and the end of the new evangelization, with particular reference to Catholic Action. " This communion is precisely the mystery of the Church." The Church, as defined by the Second Vatican Council with the words of St. Cyprian is "one people gathered together in the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (*LG* 4) For this reason the Church is the image and expression of the Trinity (a true icon.) And it is the whole Church – through her essential and indestructible communion – which inherits the evangelizing mission of Jesus. "Go out to the whole world and proclaim the Good News to all creation" (*Mk* 16,15; cf. *Mt* 28,18-20.)

It is thus the whole Church – through the mystery of missionary communion – which today receives from the Risen Christ, through Pope Paul VI and John Paul II, her new mandate for evangelization and mission: "You go into my vineyard as well" (Be a Church of communion;) "Go out to the whole world (Be a missionary Church.)

For Catholic Action this call to ecclesial communion and this missionary mandate has a particular significance which I would summarise in this way:

– To live in close communion with the Trinity which dwells in us and with Christ who sends us out – we are the branches and He is the Vine: to intensify our spiritual life through the *Lectio Divina* and the Eucharist; our communion grows and is manifested according to the degree in which we live "in Jesus Christ" and "in the Holy Spirit."

– To live with particular devotion the mystery of the local Churches: you must become part of the Church of Christ as it is being lived out in your dioceses and your parishes, in perfect communion with the universal Church presided over by Peter. I will remind you of the words of St. Paul: "So you are no longer aliens or foreign visitors; you are citizens like all the saints and part of God's household. You are part of a building that has the apostles and prophets for its foundations and Christ Jesus himself for its main cornerstone. As every structure is aligned on Him, all grow into one holy temple in the Lord; and you too in Him are being built into a house where God lives in the Spirit (*Ef* 2,19-22). To live through the Church, to listen to the Church and to love the Church in her entirety in her current, concrete situation – the one Church built on the apostles with Christ as the cornerstone.

– To take an active part in the pastoral planning of the dioceses, in full communion with the pastors: this includes preparation, carrying out and evaluating those plans.

– To live an evangelical life in this world – trying to share in the suffering and the hopes of men and women and to interpret through our faith the new signs of the times and to study them together with the pastors. In this way we can bring about a communion of salvation with the world; the one Church of Christ becomes present in the heart of the world. As the theme of this Forum says, "Men and women of the Church in the heart of the world: men and women of the world in the heart of the Church" (cf. *EN* 70). The sphere of their evangelising activity is the vast and complex world of politics, of social life, of economics, as well as the world of culture, of science and the arts."

– To discover and to insert ourselves fully into those new situations where the Church is called to proclaim the Good News with the renewed fervour of the Holy Spirit – the field of social communications, of culture, sport, the world of work and leisure activities – to find ways of being present, to witness and to carry out our evangelising mission.

III. Audacity and prophecy in the Spirit

"The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the Good News to the poor (*Mk* 4,18; cf .*Is* 61,1-2).

I would like to go back to a theme which I have already touched on and which is at the heart of the new evangelization and the heart of Catholic Action: "life in Christ" and "life in the Spirit." The new evangelization requires ardent witnesses and credible prophets. We are living in an era of martyrs, there is a need for audacity and prophecy. I wish to recall briefly some of the requirements of a lay

spirituality which pertain specifically to Catholic Action and which are essential to the new evangelization.

a – a contemplative dimension to every apostolic and missionary activity. It is an inner requirement of the Spirit which dwells in us. This Spirit makes us into prophets (in other words the "mouthpiece of the Lord", it is not we who speak but the Spirit who dwells in us and speaks through us) and makes us into witnesses ("you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and then you will be my witnesses," *Acts* 1,8). This contemplative dimension requires:

– continual meditation on the Word of God; *Lectio Divina*;

– contemplative prayer which includes moments of silence and of prayer, of pure experience of God and of discovery of God in nature, in our work, in the poor, in the cross;

– love of the wilderness, of solitude, of retreats. "The Spirit drove him out into the wilderness" (*Mk* 1,12). Today we hunger for silence, for the need to find God in the wilderness, through prayer. Catholic Action has always distinguished itself by its need for and love of Spiritual Exercises.

b – The spirituality of the incarnation, "The Word was made flesh and lived among us" (*Jn* 1,14). Contemplation does not distance us from reality – in fact, the opposite is true – it puts us in touch with reality and gives us a greater capacity to take on the sufferings of our fellow human beings. The contemplative dimension makes us deeply serene, joyful and sincere. It brings us closer to the poor and fills us with the audacity and the prophecy of the Spirit. It helps us to denounce injustice, to combat violence and to proclaim the transforming power of the Beatitudes. In other words, it enables us to assume our commitments with strength and with joy.

c – A daily growth in sacramental life. Born into Christ through our baptism ("created in Jesus Christ", *Ef* 2,19) we grow towards holiness in faithfulness to God in our daily lives "in the image of the Holy One who has called you, and Scripture says, Be holy for I am holy" (*1Pt* 1,15.)

The extraordinary Synod held in 1985 – which helped us to understand so much better the Mystery of the missionary Church of communion – left us with the following recommendation: "The saints have always been a source and the origin of renewal in the most difficult circumstances throughout the history of the Church. Today we have such a great need for saints that we must continually call unto the Lord" (*Rel F* II, A4, cf. *ChL* 16).

Catholic Action has helped us to discover the inexhaustible wealth of our baptism and of our vocation to holiness. Confirmation has anointed us with the force of the Spirit to be witnesses and prophets – "you shall be my witnesses" (*Acts* 1,8), and the Eucharist assimilates us daily to the bread of life and make us into a communion church (*1 Cor* 10,16-17.) The sacrament of reconciliation helps us to rebuild the unity which we have lost and helps us to experience more deeply the communion of God in his Church for the salvation of the world.

This strong sacramental life – which stems from baptism and is centred on the Eucharist – has always been the source of Catholic Action's paschal spirit, of its wealth of apostolic activities and its indestructible communion with the Church.

I wish to stress this point: the strength of Catholic Action has always been found in its union with the hierarchy and its faithfulness to prayer and to sacramental life. We must continually be reborn through our christian baptism and through our active participation in the Eucharist, we must let ourselves be purified by the restoring grace of reconciliation and we must renew each day the active force of our confirmation.

However we must not just stand motionless and wait for God to make us happy, we must go about our daily lives and confront the world's new challenges and changing situations with new fervour from the Holy Spirit, proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ and working to build up his kingdom. The great Pope Paul VI, who described Catholic Action as "a school of holiness" and defined its theological position within the structure of the Church as "lay ministry", went on to say that "Catholic Action must discover new passion with which to proclaim the Gospel, the only possible source of salvation for this world which will otherwise fall into desperation" (25.4.1977).

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to return with words of hope to this Forum which we have come to celebrate together. The Pontifical Council for the Laity has lent its support and encouragement to the initiative from the very beginning. It has always seen the Forum as a meeting place, a way of sharing gifts and talents, of working together for the promotion of Catholic Action. It does not in any way view it as a kind of international super-structure with powers to influence the local and national associations. Such an idea would go against the true identity of Catholic Action and against its fundamental relationship with the local hierarchy and the pastoral organisation of the local churches.

I wish however to outline some general trends which I believe should guide the work of this Forum, as I am sure you are already aware:

a – that the work of this form of traditional association – which was so strongly recommended by the Second Vatican Council (cf. *AA* 20) and so dear to the hearts of Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II – should always remain within the sphere of a Church which is a Mystery of missionary communion: that it should live in and love the communion Church, touch others with its love and bring that love to life.

b – That it should serve as a point of reference, always willing to enter into communion with the other types of association, the movements and groups which God has inspired in recent years. The Forum should always be seen as an image of communion with all the other lay organisations working with the pastors on the various local projects so that we are not just individual lay people but a true organisation of the laity. Today there is an urgent need for an organised structure within the laity – the challenges of today's world prove this and the wealth of the communion Church demands it.

c – That we promote Catholic Action within those countries of central and eastern Europe that are searching for ways of organising their Christian laity, adults and young people. This must be done with humility but also with missionary zeal, with no proselytism but with courage and love. The organization of this Forum here in Vienna is a providential occurrence.

d – That you meet with your Bishops in a spirit of filial respect and obedience. Without them there would be no Catholic Action. You should do the same with your priests, especially the parish priests and seminarians. It is not a question of selling any goods to them but rather of reminding them of

your presence and offering with joy and gratitude a real gift of the Lord to His Church which wants to be a missionary communion.

e – Finally – and I believe this to be the most important point – that the Forum is the image of a renewed Catholic Action, faithful to its original tradition but open to the demands of history, deeply filled with the Holy Spirit which is a spirit of communion and prophecy. The world waits for new men and women committed to the demands of daily life but with a deep experience of God, who can clearly proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ with the prophetic audacity of the Spirit. They must do that in an organic way as an expression of a communion Church, deeply committed to the building up of a fraternal and solid society: committed to the construction of a civilization of truth and love.

Let us pouring everything into the heart of the Virgin Mary, our mother and the mother of the Church, in whose womb "the Word was made flesh and came to live among us" (*Jn* 1,14.) May Mary always accompany and strengthen us with the joyous self-giving of the disciples, with the zeal of the witnesses and with the serene strength of the martyrs.

The journey of Catholic Action reflects the journey of Mary: a journey of faith and service, of contemplative silence, of cross, of joy and hope. It is the fruitful journey of obedience (*Fiat*) and gratitude (*Magnificat*) of giving thanks and of total and generous giving of ourselves.

May Mary always accompany us with the joyous self-giving of the disciples, the zeal of the witnesses and the serene strength of the martyrs.

Wien, October 30th 1994
Lecture at IFCA's First ordinary Assembly

Card. Eduardo F. PIRONIO
President Pontificium Consilium pro Laicis