

ADDRESSES OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS



Acción Católica es misión
L'Action Catholique, c'est la mission
Catholic Action is mission
Azione Cattolica è missione
con tutti e per tutti
II International Congress
Rome | Vatican City | 27-30 April 2017

To participants in the Congress of the International Forum of Catholic Action (IFCA)*

Synod Hall, Thursday, 27 April 2017



To Italian Catholic Action for its 150th anniversary

Saint Peter's Square - Sunday, 30 April 2017

27th April 2017

Dear brothers and sisters,

Greetings to you all on the occasion of the celebration of this Catholic Action International Congress, with the theme: "Catholic Action is mission with everyone and for everyone". I would like to share some preoccupations and considerations with you.

I will speak to you about CA's charism, then about some lines of action and other subjects, about who the agents and the recipients are, about the style which CA should adopt and about the project.

Allow me to leave the text because this gives me the chance to say what I feel. I also feel that I cannot express myself as I want, when I have to speak Italian in the Square. If I could speak Spanish there, I would be able to express myself better.

*Full-text transcript - in the boxes the additions of Pope Francis to the official text published on the website of the Holy See.

Charism – rebirth in the light of *Evangelii gaudium*

The Charism. The reference framework of all the apostolic action of the Church has to indicate as to how we can reformulate the charism in the light of *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), just as *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN) did in its time. However EN is still valid. It is the best postconciliar document which, even today, continues to indicate the way of action of the Church. EG is a somewhat updated translation, but that which is fundamental is there, in EN: this is only fair to this document as this document has not lost its actuality. How can we reformulate the charism in the light of EG in today's context?

Historically, Catholic Action's mission has been to form lay people who assume their proper responsibility in the world. Today, in concrete terms, it is *the formation of missionary disciples*. Thank you for having decisively taken *Evangelii gaudium* as your magna carta.

Catholic Action's charism is the charism of the Church itself, deeply incarnated in the today and here of every diocesan Church which, discerning in contemplation and keeping in mind its people's lives, looking for new ways of evangelizing and of carrying out its mission, starting from the different parish realities.

It is not a project of proselytism, because this is against the Gospel. And here I would like to make Benedict XVI's words my own: "the Church does not grow through proselytism, but by attraction". It grieves me a lot when I see certain pastoral agents, lay people, consecrated persons, priests and bishops who are still reverting to proselytism, when "by attraction", the brilliant phrase used by Benedict XVI, should be the compass for our journey.

Traditionally, Catholic Action has had four pillars or legs *Prayer, Formation, Sacrifice* and *Apostolate*. According to the time in history, it has set one of these legs first and then the others. So, at a certain time, the stress was on prayer or doctrinal formation. Given the present characteristics, the apostolate should be the distinctive trait and it should be the first leg to be set.

We should not ignore the other three, but the first challenge is to go out, the apostolate comes first and then the others will follow. Missionary apostolate needs prayer, formation and sacrifice, it needs the other three. When one goes out, one realizes that if the other three are not there, one's work is superficial and does not bear fruit. This comes out very clearly in the Aparecida Document which has had a great influence on EG – I was there and had to study it. In the mission, there is an integrative dynamism which takes prayer, formation and sacrifice for granted, but it is the mission, it is the fact that one goes out, which brings everything together.

And this is not to be done to the detriment of the other realities but just the opposite. It is what provokes the others. Missionary apostolate needs prayers, formation and sacrifice. This comes out clearly in Aparecida and in *Evangelii Gaudium*. *There is an integrative dynamism in the mission.*

What am I asking of you? I appeal to you to offer formation to people, to men and women, children ...

Offer formation: offer a process of growing in one's faith, an on-going mission-oriented catechetical programme, adapted to every reality, based on the Word of God which fosters a happy friendship with Jesus and an experience of fraternal love.

Pray: with that holy extroversion which puts one's heart in other people's needs, in their suffering and their joy - a prayer which develops and which takes you far. Thus you will avoid looking constantly at yourself.

Avoid that winding prayer which does not urge you to go out of yourself, which does not lead you to the mission, which does not link with reality. And pray a lot. For some, praying is tedious and sometimes it is. Many times, Saint Theresa of the Child Jesus slept before the tabernacle but in spite of this she became a saint. She just sat in front of Jesus and did not move and Jesus liked this. This strengthens the heart and makes it become more apostolic. Pray with your eyes on the mission.

Sacrifice yourself: not just to feel holier - generous sacrifice is that which does good to others. Offer your time to find out what to do to help others grow, offer what you have in your pockets and share it with those who have less than you, offer the gift of your personal vocation generously to embellish the *common home* and help it grow.

There is a test which I usually give to very young children. I ask: "What do you do if you have two sweets and a friend arrives?" At times but very rarely, the answer is: "I put them in my bag to have them later". The majority would say that they would give one to their friend and keep the other one. It is good to share for the sake of others. The second question: "You have one sweet and a friend comes: what do you do?" Very few would answer: "I would eat it hurriedly". Others would say: "I would share it, half for me and half for my friend". Others, but very few would say: "I would give it to my friend as I would already have had one".

How are my prayers and sacrifices? Do I keep my sweet in my bag, share it, or renounce to it as I would already have had one? Our dedication, to be of service and to evangelise, should be accompanied by a spirit of sacrifice.

If I am invited to visit an old people's home and right on that day there is a football match, an important match on TV which I do not want to miss, what do I do? Your questions and proposals as regards sacrifice should be realistic.

Sacrifice should never be artificial or narcissist, you should imitate Jesus. He committed himself for the good of others: it is the only Christian meaning of sacrifice. When it comes to renewing our evangelising commitment, this should be the only Christian meaning of sacrifice.

Renew your evangelizing commitment – at diocesan level– at parish level

This point is very clear to me. Some time ago, during a pastoral visit as Pope, during a meeting with the parish priests, I was asked as to what the charism of the gathering should be – there were also religious persons – *fondata da San Pietro ovvero dei sacerdoti diocesani!* My reply was "a diocesan orientation". It is the same reply which I would give to you if you had to ask me to indicate the main charism and the most important evangelising commitment found in CA's charism. It is a diocesan orientation under the leadership of the Bishop.

In Catholic Action, the mission is not a duty among the others, it *is the duty*. Catholic Action's charism is to carry out the pastoral work of the Church. If the mission is not its distinctive strength, Catholic Action's true spirit is missed and it loses its reason for being.

The renewal and updating of Catholic Action's evangelizing commitment is vital. It must aim at reaching everyone, everywhere, all occasions, and all existential outlying situations; in reality and not just as a formulation of principles.

I like to use the word 'outlying situations because these are society's most precarious places. Normally we think that this word refers to the poor, the poorest, and normally it is so, but it refers also to those who think it differently, to agnostics, ... I am open even to these, to listen to them, to dialogue with them. This is what reorienting our ways means.

This implies *rethinking your formation plans, your apostolic ways and even your own ways of praying* so that they may be, *essentially and not occasionally, missionary*.

I am a missionary on Saturday, a little, and then? As CA members, you are characteristically and not occasionally missionary; even in difficult and risky situations.

Abandon the old criterion: 'because this is the way we have always done it'.

There have been things in CA's history which have been really good and worthwhile but today they would be out of context if we had to repeat them and here I would like to quote a phrase which you should never use: "this is the way we have always done it". This phrase is a bad word. We do not have to change because times are changing. That which is fundamental, that is the announcement of Jesus Christ, the missionary disposition, prayer, the need to pray, the need for self sacrifice, never change. But we have to find out how to go about them but they never change. "This is the way we have always done it" has done and still does a lot of harm to the Church. When taking decisions, this obsession does not leave you free. Take Chapter 23 of the Gospel of Saint Matthew and read what Jesus said to the "obsessed". When, in a diocese, in a

parish, in a centre, in a CA group there is the temptation “to be obsessed”, read what Jesus is saying to you at that moment: “the obsessed are hypocrites ... At times we should leave the old criterion behind because it does not work and instead use CA’s realities with criteria which are needed today and which bear fruit.

Catholic Action must take on itself *the whole mission of the Church by totally belonging to the diocesan Church starting from the Parish.*

CA is not a satellite. Do not be wordly ecclesiastics whom we sometimes find in the Church. These maintain that they have their spirituality, are closed within themselves, self-centred ... This should not be CA’s attitude as CA has a belonging. CA belongs to the diocese. A CA which is not diocesan could be a good thing but it is not a CA. A CA which does not incarnate itself in the parish is not a CA ... but has the parish become outdated?

The mission of the universal Church is updated in every particular Church with its own characteristics; likewise Catholic Action gets its authentic life by answering and assuming as its own *the pastoral work of every diocesan Church through its concrete insertion* starting from the parishes.

Every diocesan Church has a pastoral line of action, a pastoral plan and the Bishop’s directives. These are developed by the Pastoral Council so CA should insert itself in this line of action and incarnate itself in the parishes. The parish is not outdated. Parishes differ because the Church has always looked for different approaches. The parish is not outdated simply because the diocesan model is not outdated. The Bishop keeps close to the people of God through the parish.

Catholic Action should offer the diocesan Church mature laity, which, as a way of realizing its vocation, *supports the pastoral projects of every place with readiness.* You have to be concretely incarnated.

You should incarnate yourself in the place where you live and this is what it means to be catholic.

The apostle John fought the first heresy in the Church. This came some years after the death and resurrection of the Lord. It was scandalous to say that God

was made flesh but John is very clear; whoever denies that the Word was made flesh is an Antichrist.

An ecclesial movement which does not incarnate itself in the ecclesial realities of the diocese through the parish, in a way proper to its nature, risks entering in the category of not being Christian, not to say Antichrist. When we come across these factions which thrive on themselves, study a lot but live closed within themselves ... these could be described as heretic gnostic saints ... but they are not catholic.

And a CA, which chooses to remain closed within itself and which does not incarnate itself by following the ways of the Word to redeem us, could be good but is not catholic. Always incarnated! But incarnated does not mean there where I want, but there where the Church wants me, in the diocese, in the parish.

This incarnation criterion does not apply only to inculturization which is the other aspect of incarnation. It applies to the organization as well as to the way in which the Church organises itself.

You cannot be like those groups which are *so universal* that they are not based anywhere, do not answer to anyone and keep looking for the best place for them.

These groups are orbital in the Church. It is true that we are living in a satellite era and these groups exit in the Church as well but CA cannot be one of these. You should be rooted, incarnated in concrete realities and these concrete realities are the diocese and the parish. But there is also the CA university campus. Incarnate yourself there, but always through the Bishop, not as an independent group. The diocese is the incarnation criterion and the parish is a *gran criteriu*. There is another level of incarnation. This is when there are other more original groups dictated by pastoral realities which are not parish-based like pastoral work on the university campus. These should incarnate themselves through the bishop but should not be ignored. There is no CA without a Bishop. There is no CA without a diocesan orientation.

Sometimes things happen in the spirituality of certain religious congregations. I can think of a General Mother Superior who wanted to change the congregation by giving universal recommendations. One of these was that in the morning, instead of going to the chapel, the nuns were to immerse themselves in nature! Maybe a little pantheistic! In spirituality we cannot have a disincarnated style. These are the modern forms of gnosticism which do not help.

Concreteness is a criterion you should keep – our faith is concrete – the Word was made flesh concretely. We have to keep in mind that when we go to heaven, we will be judged on a very concrete protocol which we find in Matthew 25. When we recite the creed, we affirm concrete facts. When faith is not concrete, it is not catholic. That which is catholic is always concrete. But that which is concrete can be corrupted as well. This is sin's path which is also concrete. Try to find something which is not concrete in the Creed, in the criteria demanded by Jesus in the universal judgement and in the Beatitudes which are the project for our life. And if someone thinks that the beatitudes are an idealistic journey, the conclusion is definitely very concrete: blessed are you when they persecute you, when they judge you, when they martyr you. And here, any illusion of sophistication in that which is catholic disappears.

Agents – Everyone without exception

All Catholic Action members are *dynamically missionaries*. Children evangelize children, young people other young people, adults other adults and so on. Nothing better than one's equal to show that it is possible to experience the joy of one's own faith..

Avoid falling into the *perfectionist temptation of eternal preparation* for the mission and of *eternal analysis*, which when finished, are already obsolete and outdated.

How many diocesan curias or religious institutes are full of pastoral plans which when finished were no longer relevant.

The example is Jesus with his apostles: he sends them with what they had. Then he reunited them and helped them to discern on what they had experienced.

When Jesus sent the 72 disciples, these did not have the Denzinger in hand. They just had an experience of Jesus, they knew the gist of the Christian message and they knew the beatitudes. With that little, they went back to tell Jesus that even demons surrendered themselves to them. It was the strength of their preaching, the strength of their testimony. It was what they had and what was needed at that moment.

Reality should dictate to you the time you should let the Holy Spirit guide you. He is the interior master who enlightens our deeds as long as we are free from preconceptions and conditionings. One learns how to evangelize by evangelizing, just as one learns how to pray by praying, as long as one has a good disposition.

Everyone can go on a mission, even if not everyone is able go out into the street or in the countryside. Elderly people, who have been members for a long time, as well as newly enrolled ones, should be given a space and this is very important. One could say: they could be the *contemplative and interceding sector* within Catholic Action's different sections. They can create the patrimony of prayer and grace for the mission. This applies to the sick as well. God listens to these with special tenderness. They will all feel involved and will find themselves active and useful.

We should include special categories in our CA groups. Involve everyone. Everyone has a mission in the world. If you have an evangelising heart, you can be included - each and everyone.

And here I would like to speak again about something which has been very close to my heart for some time: the elderly. We are living in a throw away culture ... where the philosophy is "use and throw away" and when something does not work or is not productive, it is to be thrown away. When elderly people reach a certain age, they are discarded because they are no longer of use ...the trend is to discard them ... At times they need medical treatment or special care ... so we find them a nursing home ...and leave them there... . We are thus throwing away part of our family wealth.

Young people are unemployed, 40% in Italy, 47% in Croatia, in Spagna the figure reaches 50%, and so on in all European countries. Why? They are of no use, so they become waste. We do not say that we are discarding them, but in fact, what can a young person do if he is unemployed? He gets sick or commits suicide. (The statistics showing juvenile suicides are very worrying). They may also fall on drugs or join terroristic or criminal groups seeking to find an ideal or something to do in life.

Even children are discarded because no one cares for them unless they are very intelligent and are sent to some special bilingual or trilingual school so that one day they may become leaders. Everything has become like a funnel. More people are being discarded and the funnel is taking shape.

Today I feel it is important that I entrust you with a commitment. Work to establish dialogue between the very young and the elderly. I appeal to CA to find a way of doing this especially in the parishes. Non passa tutto per questa scelta ma vedete il modo.

When I pray Joel 3,2 I am greatly touched by the fact that one of the signs of the kingdom is: "old people shall dream dreams and young people shall prophecy".

Young people will prophesy and implement the dreams of the elderly. We have deprived old people from their ability to dream because they are boring, because they are of no help to us. And we have cut off the roots of our young ones. This commitment is really pressing and I believe that today the Spirit is asking the Church to help in this dialogue, to help children in being nearer to old people, to ask them questions, to make them speak. This is beneficial for a child's and a young person's heart. It will be a prophecy which they will try to accomplish, to carry out. And this will be a renovation. It is impossible to bear fruit if the roots are very weak or do not exist. Everything will dry up. And we are cutting off the roots.

I seriously entrust you with this task. Keep in mind that everyone can do this and that this dialogue is important. I have seen it in some particular churches: groups of young people who go in old people's homes, in hospitals, they play the guitar and sing with the old people and then enter into a conversation with them. Then they realise that they should go again because there they have found a wealth which they should treasure. I recommend this in a special way.

Recipients – All men and all spheres

It is important that Catholic Action is present in the *political, business and professional world* but not because we believe that we are perfect and well prepared Christians but to be of better service.

It is imperative that Catholic Action is present *in prisons*

Including with those serving a life sentence because each prisoner needs a horizon and not bars or walls .. CA can provide a horizon and offer rehabilitation

in hospitals, in the streets, in slums, in factories. If it does not do this, it will be a *selective* institution which does not say anything to anyone, not even to the Church itself.

We have to be very strict about this point: concreteness, involving ourselves concretely in outlying areas more. I will tell you a story about a difficult unreachable situation. This involved a bishop but any lay person could follow his example. In his diocese, a young person organised a manifestation against the Church – it was not a procession. Instead of singing hymns they sang songs heartily, accompanied by rude, offensive and blasphemous gestures, against the Church, the Pope and the bishops. The bishop realised that here he had a case of a difficult, unapproachable situation. He found out who the leader was and after having prayed, he invited him for lunch. Evidently, the leader did not ask the bishop to hear his confession or to give him communion and nor did he become Catholic. They talked about his grandfather, his grandmother and about his ancestors. What this bishop did, reaching out to outlying difficult situations, is an example which CA should follow. Do not be afraid of anything, not even of those you face in the streets and say all sort of things. Therefore we need to pray, ask for enlightenment and ask for the help of the Holy Spirit so as to take the necessary steps.

What do I ask of CA?

I would like a Catholic Action among the people: in the parish, in the diocese, in the country, in the neighbourhood, in the family, in study and working spheres,

in the countryside, in all spheres of life. It is in these new areopaghi where decisions are taken and where culture develops.

Streamline the ways of adhering. Do not be custom houses. You cannot be more restrictive than the Church itself nor more papists than the Pope. Open the doors, do not set examinations of Christian perfection because by so doing you will be promoting a pharisaic hypocrisy. What we need is active mercy.

The commitment which lay people who join Catholic Action undertake is to look ahead. It is the decision to work for the building of the kingdom. We do not have to “bureaucratise” this particular grace because the Lord’s invitation comes when we least expect it; we can neither “sacramentalise” formalization with requirements which respond to another sphere of the life of faith and not to the evangelizing commitment.

May Catholic Action offer a welcoming space and a *Christian experience* to those, who for personal reasons, feel that they are “second class Christians”.

Method – Among the people

The word “people” might be mistaken with the word “populist” but I am referring to persons, to the people of God. One can speak about people as an idea, a logical category and so can speak about populism or, ideologically, speak about popular categories, but people is a mythical category and so we can speak about populism, people means people, persons. When we see the “crowd” which followed Jesus, we refer to the persons who followed him ..., certainly the disciples, but it is always people, persons ... they followed him because they liked him, he cured the sick and they liked the way he spoke with authority.

The method depends on the recipients. As the Council tells us and as we often pray during Mass: mindful and sharing men’s struggles and hopes so as to show them the way of salvation. Catholic Action *cannot keep aloof from the people*; it comes from the people and should stay among the people. You have to make Catholic Action more popular.

And what does this mean? Does this mean that we have to go in search of those who do not form part of society's elite? No, I am not saying so in this sociological sense because this is the popular ideology. I am saying it in the mythical sense of people. You should build a Catholic Action of those holy and faithful people to God.

It is not a question of image but of truth and charism. Nor is it demagogy but it is following on the master's footsteps. He was never disgusted at anything.

To do this *it is good to take a popular neighbourhood* share people's lives and learn to discover where they are aiming for, their interests and their pursuits, their deepest yearnings and anguish; also what they need from us. This is fundamental if we do not want to fall into the situation of *failing to answer questions which everybody asks*.

Which are the questions which these people are asking, which individuals are asking? My answers should be based on real questions because sometimes we present a prepared speech and risk giving replies to questions which nobody is asking. This is a fundamental approach if we do not want to be ineffective.

One can sit at his desk and think of ways of evangelising but he will be in a position to do this only after having been in people's midst and not the other way round.

Go, move on, keep concrete contact and then yes, sit at your desk and draft your pastoral plans and then everything will be fine.

A more popular, more incarnated Catholic Action *will cause you more problems* because there will be more individuals, who apparently *are not in a position to make it*, who would want to be part of the institution: families where the parents are not married in Church, men and women with a difficult past or present but who struggle on, disoriented and disturbed young people

It is a challenge for Catholic Action's *ecclesial maternity*; accepting everyone and accompanying him on his life's journey with the crosses which he carries on his shoulders.

Everyone can participate *starting with what he has and with what he can do.*

For this, specific people will have to be trained. With this and for this, specific people should pray.

Sharpen your observation to see *the signs of God evident in realities, especially in expressions of popular religiosity.* From these you can understand men's hearts better and discover the amazing ways in which God acts beyond our concepts.

There is a wisdom in people of good will, in people who earn the daily bread for their children. There are many temptations and a lot of evil but there is also so much wisdom which teaches us a lot. I remember one night, during a pilgrimage in Lujan, I was hearing confessions. There was a 22-23 year old sturdy young man, with long hair, a ring in his nostrils, full of strength, in the queue. He was a skilled worker, the son of a single mother, a part-time housekeeper in various homes. This lady had given a good education to her son. She sent him to a technical school from where he qualified as a skilled worker. This young man found himself in a messy situation and started worrying. One day he spoke to his mother about this and she told him: "Look my son, within a few days, there will be a pilgrimage to Lujan, go and ask our Virgin Mother what to do". This is wisdom. "And you, what did you do?" I asked. And he told me: "I went to the Virgin Mary" – and his eyes were wet because he had cried – "I have gone in front of our Virgin Mother and now I am going to do this and this ...". This is people's wisdom. The mother did not know what her son should do but she had suggested to him where he should go. There is a lot of wisdom in our people, a lot of wisdom which we should assimilate.

Sharpen your sight so as to see the Signs of God in real situations.

Project – An out-going Catholic Action – Passion for Christ, passion for our people

Yesterday we read the Gospel of Mark, and what does Jesus say? “Go, open out ... sometimes we imagine that the Church is ours, pretty closed. In the Apocalypse Jesus says: “ I am standing at the door, knocking ... and if someone opens the door, I will come in to share a meal! ...” He asks to enter in our heart. Jesus knocks at the door from the inside so that we may let him go out. Be an outgoing CA, leading out towards the street, and I insist, this is not proselytism.

Passion for Christ, passion for our people

You have proposed an out-going Catholic Action and this is good because this takes you to the core of your being. An exit means an opening, generosity, facing reality beyond the four walls of the institution and of the parishes. This means *renouncing to excessive control and to programming results*. This freedom is a fruit of the Holy Spirit which helps you grow.

Catholic Action’s evangelising project should follow these steps: *lead, that is take the initiative, participate, accompany, imbue and celebrate*. A step forward in our outreach is to be concrete and to proceed together. This is already an achievement to celebrate. Pass on the joy of your faith, the joy you feel when evangelising, in all opportune and not so opportune occasions.

Do not fall into the temptation of excessive *structuring*. Be enterprising, you are not more faithful to the Church if, at every step, you expect to be told what to do.

Please do not be of those who do not do anything before they ask for permission or because they do not find whom to ask. At times it is better to ask for pardon afterwards than to ask for permission before, but act ...

Encourage your members to appreciate the casual one to one missionary work or that initiated by the community.

And please, this serious theme reoccupies me: do not clericalise lay people! The Holy Spirit's mission is in the first sacrament we all receive as lay people. Then the Spirit may call us in other ways. Do not clericalise lay people. It is a great temptation.

Many times it happened to me (at least three times in my diocese): a parish priest comes to me and says that he has a phenomenal lay person who does this and that and I tell him: "how good, what a good organiser he is!" and he tells me "what do think about making him a deacon?" "Do not give him a vocation. Leave it to the Holy Spirit. Do not clericalise"...

Baptism is the first step. But in its origin the Church made a very beautiful distinction.

When the Hellenists complained with the apostles because their widows and orphans were not cared for, the apostles organised a small council and during this meeting they came out with the idea of having deacons and so they looked for seven worthy men and they entrusted them with the care of widows, orphans and other material matters. Rome has a distinguished deacon who was the bursar of the diocese, the martyr Lawrence. When Peter justified this choice, he used this phrase: "and to us, to the bishops, prayer and the announcement of the Word". The main duty of the Bishop is to pray and together with praying he is to announce the Word ... But I am talking to CA lay people. It seems as if I am talking to the daughter-in-law so that the mother-in-law may hear what I say!
No

Do not clericalise lay people. Do not let your members' aspiration be to form part of the parishes' sanhedrin which surrounds the parish priest but let it be a passion for the kingdom. However do not forget *to present the vocational theme* very seriously - a school of sanctity which basically means discovering one's own vocation, which is not to be a leader or a churchwarden, but rather, and above all, to be *an evangeliser*.

You should be *meeting places* for the other institutional charisms and movements present in the Church without any fear of the loss of one's identity. Furthermore, your members should develop into evangelisers, catechists, missionaries and social workers who work to help the Church to keep growing.

Very often it is said that Catholic Action is *the long arm of the hierarchy*. Far from being a prerogative which makes you look down on the others, it is a great responsibility, which implies faithfulness and consistency to what the Church has shown us at all times in history, without expecting to remain anchored to past ways as if they were the only possibilities. Faithfulness to the mission entails this “*good plasticity*” of those who have turned an ear to the people and the other to God.

In the 1937 publication “*La Acción Católica a luz de la teología Tomista*”, one finds: “Perhaps, should not *Catholic Action* be translated into *Catholic Passion*?”.

This was in 1937, when I was one year old. I ask you, should not CA try harder to convert itself and unceasingly strive to be action, with Catholic Passion?
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Catholic passion, the Church’s passion is to live the pleasant and comforting joy of evangelising. This is what Catholic Action needs.

Thank you.

30th April 2017

Dear Friends from Catholic Action, good morning!

I am very happy to be with you, who have come in such large numbers to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the establishment of your Association. I greet you all with affection, beginning with your General Assistant and the National President, whom I thank for their words of introduction to our meeting. Italian Catholic Action was born of the dream of two young men, Mario Fani and Giovanni Acquaderni. With the passage of time, it became a journey of faith for many generations and a summons to holiness for countless persons. Children, young people and adults became disciples of Jesus and tried to live as joyful witnesses of his love in the world. For me too, it is familiar territory: both my father and my grandmother belonged to Catholic Action!

Yours is a beautiful and important story, for which you have many reasons to thank the Lord and for which the Church is grateful to you. It is the story of a group of people – men and women of all ages and conditions, young and old, laity and clergy – who sought a shared experience of encountering the Lord, without regard for differences of social position, cultural background and places of origin. Lay faithful who together sought ways to proclaim by their lives the beauty of God's love and to contribute, with their personal efforts and competence, to the building of a more just, fraternal and supportive society. It is a story of passion for the world and for the Church – I thought of this when I told you about a book written in Argentina in 1937 entitled *Catholic Action and Catholic Passion*. Yours is a story that shaped distinguished men and women of exemplary faith, who have served the nation with generosity and courage.

This impressive history should not tempt you to keep looking back, or in the mirror, or resting comfortably in an armchair! Keep this in mind: don't keep looking over your shoulder, because you will trip and fall! Don't keep looking at yourself in a mirror: so many of us are unsightly, so it is better not even to look! And don't rest in an armchair: it will make you put on weight and that won't help your cholesterol! Looking back on life's long journey helps you realize that you are a people who walk together, caring for one another, helping one another

to grow humanly and in faith, sharing with others the mercy with which the Lord caresses us. I encourage you to continue being a band of missionary disciples who experience and testify to the joy of knowing that the Lord loves us with infinite love, and who, together with him, profoundly love the times in which we live. This is the lesson taught by the great witnesses of holiness who were the trailblazers of your association. Among them, I would recall Giuseppe Toniolo, Armida Barelli, Piergiorgio Frassati, Antonietta Meo, Teresio Olivelli and Vittorio Bachelet. Catholic Action, live up to your history! Live up to these women and men who have gone before you.

Over these hundred and fifty years, Catholic Action has always been distinguished by great love for Jesus and the Church. Today too, you are called to pursue your particular vocation by placing yourselves at the service of the dioceses, always in union with their Bishops, and in the parishes where the Church lives among the people, always. The entire People of God benefits from the fruits of your commitment, carried out in harmony between the universal Church and the particular Church. It is in the specifically lay vocation to a holiness lived out in daily life that you will find the strength and the courage to live your faith, wherever you are, making hospitality and dialogue the style by which you become neighbours to one another and experience the beauty of a shared responsibility. Never weary of pursuing avenues that encourage the style of authentic synodality, a way of being God's people where everyone is able to contribute to an attentive, reflective and prayerful reading of the signs of the times. In this way, you will come to know and to do God's will, in the conviction that the Holy Spirit is daily at work, renewing all things.

I encourage you to carry out your apostolic experience while remaining rooted in your parish, "which is not an outdated institution" – you know that, don't you? The parish is not an outdated institution, because "it is the presence of a Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God's word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 28).

The parish is the place where people can feel welcomed just as they are, to be helped to grow humanly and spiritually, in faith and in love for God's creation and for their brothers and sisters. But this can only happen if the parish is not caught up in itself, and Catholic Action, present in the parish, is not caught up in

itself either. Catholic Action should ensure that the parish remains “in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed group made up of a chosen few” (*ibid.*). Please, don’t let that happen!

Dear members of Catholic Action, may all your initiatives, plans and projects be a missionary experience, directed to evangelization and not to self-preservation. Your relationship to the diocese and the parish should find concrete expression in the streets of your cities, towns and neighbourhoods. As in the past hundred and fifty years, continue to feel a great sense of responsibility for sowing the good seed of the Gospel in the life of the world, through your charitable work, through your involvement in political life – but please, politics in the noblest sense of the world, politics with a capital P! But also through your strong commitment to education and your engagement in the cultural sphere. Expand your own hearts in order to expand the heart of your parishes. Take your faith to the streets, meet everyone, welcome everyone, listen to everyone, embrace everyone. Every life is a life loved by the Lord, and every face shows us the face of Christ, especially the faces of the poor, the hurting, those who feel abandoned, those fleeing death who seek refuge in our homes and towns. “None of us can think we are exempt from concern for the poor and for social justice” (*ibid.*, 201).

Remain open to the world around you. Engage readily in dialogue with your neighbours, even those who may have other ideas than your own, yet long, like you, for peace, justice and fraternity. It is in dialogue that we can shape a shared future. Through dialogue, we build peace, caring for all and entering into dialogue with all.

Dear children, young people and adults of Catholic Action: go forth, reach out to every periphery! Go forth and be Church there, with the strength of the Holy Spirit!

May the maternal protection of the Immaculate Virgin sustain you, and may the encouragement and the esteem of your Bishops accompany you. With great affection, I impart my Blessing to you and to all the Association. And please, remember to pray for me!