

THE FEATURES OF CATHOLIC ACTION'S FACE FOR THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

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Let us see which are the features of Catholic Action's face at the beginning of the third millennium.

In order to outline this face, we need to start from the "founding" reality of the Baptism. Through it we are all embodied in the people of God, we are all children of the Father, members of the Church, whose head is Christ.

Through the Baptism we are all called to holiness. This is the common vocation of all christifideles, both priests and laypeople. This common vocation to holiness in us as laypeople shows specific characteristics owing to this divine vocation that we, as laypeople, have to live in the world and from the world aiming at the height of holiness in our life. This is the specific way of our Christian existence and, at the same time, the specific function of our apostolic commitment. The Vatican Council II states this in a very precise way: "Laypeople they ought themselves to take on as their distinctive task the renewal of the temporal order" (AA 7). "It belongs to the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will" (LG 31).

The Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* n. 43 clearly states this ecclesial mission of the laypeople, which, at the same time, is their journey towards holiness: "Christians who shirk their temporal duties, shirk their duties towards their neighbour, neglect God himself, and endanger their eternal salvation".

Aware of the double belonging to the ecclesial and to the civil community, we should live and help each other to live the Church, mystery of missionary communion. We are called to make the Church present in the heart of the world and the world present in the heart of the Church. This existence comes from the Baptism, for all laypeople.

We have answered the Lord's call and have decided to live this lay identity according to our special CA vocation.

So, what is essential for CA? Which are the features of CA's face?

In the Council ecclesiology of communion and mission, CA's identity is defined by the "four notes" of *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, to be taken all together: ecclesiality, laity, organicity and cooperation with the Hierarchy (AA 20). These four notes are the wealth of the tradition of CA and of the conciliar experience.

The first note, **ecclesiality**: it is constitutive of CA, since its goal is the same apostolic one of the Church; because it is called to work so that the Church may give witness of its unity in diversity, before the world and may proclaim the Gospel to all men and women with no fear. This apostolic aim of the Church which CA takes on itself is not lived in an abstract way, but becomes a concrete historical and geographic reality in the particular Church, in the diocese. CA is characterized by its fitting in the diocesan pastoral action.

The second note, **laity (secularity)**: it underlines the lay character. CA is made of laypeople who, as such, collaborate with the hierarchy, contributing through their own experience and assuming their own responsibilities in directing and organizing their association and in developing its methods of action. From this lay character arises CA's unavoidable responsibility in the apostolic work within the various spheres of life.

The third note, **organicity**: CA is not a commitment carried out by single people. In CA the laypeople work together, united as an organic body. This communitary style of the association keeps in account the different realities, the different ages of life and the different apostolic fields where its members work for the evangelization both of the ecclesial and the civil community. Organization is essential (not the the concrete organizative form).

The fourth note: the **cooperation with the hierarchy**, together with the other notes, completes CA's identity. This special bond with the hierarchy requires from CA a special service to communion and mission. It is a characteristic deeply connected with CA's specific ministeriality and pastoral readiness. It is because of this service and readiness to collaborate in the pastoral plans that *Ad Gentes* mentions CA as one of the essential ministries for founding the Church (*plantatio ecclesiae*).

After the Council Vatican II many lay movements spread giving new life to the Church and bringing a great wealth with the variety of charisms aroused by the Spirit. It is in this context that the Synod for Lay people was held. Its recommendations are summed up in the Apostolic Exhortation

Christifideles Laici about "The vocation and mission of lay people in the Church and in the world"; there John Paul II explains clearly the Council teachings, mentioning, among all ecclesial movements, CA as an association of laypeople called "to be of service through their faithfulness and good works to promote, according to their own vocation and their own method, the growth of the entire Christian community, pastoral activities and infusing every aspect of life with the Gospel spirit" (CFL 31).

CA is called to live the ecclesial communion to the utmost, to offer a firm and convinced witness to communion with the Pope and the Bishops, through its faithful readiness to receive their doctrinal teachings and their pastoral directions and, in real terms, to take on itself their pastoral plans, working together with the other movements and associations.

CA is committed with an active presence in human society. This commitment places it at the service of man's dignity, in the light of Church's social teaching. Its action is addressed to the whole society and to all fields and settings of society, as well as to the Church herself. Among the children, the youths, the adults, in the families, in the world of work, of culture, of politics, of economic, of education, of science and of art, wherever it wishes to be presence and action of the Church, wishes to announce the Gospel and to set up the Church.

To achieve this mission, *Christifideles Laici* underlines that CA has its own specific formative style. Formation is essential for CA, a formation which has its own characteristics:

Formation to communion: seen as the development of a special sensibility to create communion, in the Church as well as in the world. For this, we should love the Church, this real Church, we should feel, as our own, this social and cultural reality we live in and in which God has thought we should live since eternity. Only in this way we can be builders of reconciliation in our communities and countries.

Formation which brings us to unity between faith and life: formation which allows us to be witnesses of the Resurrection in our places.

Formation to Social Teaching of the Church: a formation which may allow us to imbue all fields of culture, politics, economy, education, health, art, communication, family with the Gospel spirit.

Formation for the interior and progressive growth in the holiness of life through a spirituality of the incarnation.

In short, a formation for communion which leads laypeople to unity between faith and life and to a steadfast interior growth towards sanctity in life. Formation in CA should express the baptismal dynamism and aim to build christian laypeople who are aware of their baptism and of their own responsibility in the Church and in society. *Ecclesia in Europa* n. 41 rightly underlines the necessity of pedagogic programmes, which enable the lay faithful to risk their faith in the temporal affairs and offer them not only doctrine and impulses but also a spiritual direction so that they may live their commitment as an authentic journey of sanctity.

These are the essential characteristics of CA, yesterday, today and forever, in this as well as in many other countries in the whole world. This is the permanent gift of the Holy Spirit to its Church.

In the CA of the different countries, we may discover various forms which embody its essential features in connection with the particular historical, cultural and ecclesial characteristics of each country. All of us however should cast a deep look into our associations to verify whether and how these features are incarnated today. This means a renewed engagement to search for and build the common good. It is urgent that we commit ourselves and involve others in searching for and building the common good.

This demands a serious care for formation, a deep inquiry about our attitudes and at the same time a determined action. All of us have something to do in our communities, in our countries: children, youths, adults, nobody can be feel excluded. It is urgent to contribute to the renewal of the parishes according to *Ecclesia in Europa*, so that they may be "a place where christian life is actually practised, as well as a place of authentic humanization and socialization, both in a context of dispersion and anonymity as that in the big modern cities, and in the rural areas with few population" (*EiE* 15).

If we commit ourselves seriously to this task, we will contribute to build a new Europe which answers the thirst of justice, so long hoped for by so many brothers and which is the base of a more human, fraternal and solid world.

Thanks to our faith, we know that this time belongs to the Father's design and is essentially a time of grace, a time of salvation. Jesus opens us the journey to change it in a providential time, a time of hope.

Let us listen to John Paul II's words: "*Duc in Altum*, Catholic Action" and let us look to the future with courage!