

## **Catholic Action: a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church**

*They came to Jericho. And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a sizable crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind man, the son of Timaeus, sat by the roadside begging. On hearing that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, son of David, have pity on me." And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he kept calling out all the more, "Son of David, have pity on me." Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." So they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take courage; get up, he is calling you." He threw aside his cloak, sprang up, and came to Jesus. Jesus said to him in reply, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man replied to him, "Master, I want to see." Jesus told him, "Go your way; your faith has saved you." Immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way. (Mk 10:46-52)*

### **1. Many of our days pass with closed horizons**

He is so concentrated on every whisper and on all the different footsteps that he can tell whoever is passing. He is always sitting there, by the roadside, begging. That swift step is that of the boy who lives in the house nearby. He could not expect much from him as he has no money, but he always greets him. The other steady step is that of the baker who never gave him not even a stale piece of bread. That chattering is coming from the people who live down the alley. Sometimes, when they notice him and lose the thread of their gossip, they drop some coins in front of him. Some stop to speak to him and some even tell him that, in the neighbouring villages, there is a man called Jesus, who can restore every person his dignity. He is not a doctor, neither a magician nor a priest who serves in the temple but one who talks about God as no other person has ever done before. He does not ask for money but for faith; he is not interested in those who are somebody but in those who are poor and suffer.

And for this poor blind man, son of Timaeus, the days are long and sad, and his life is spent trying to catch the good steps and the people's rumours of hope. Even many of our days pass without any open horizons, without us understanding where we are, where we are going. We aim very low, withdraw within ourselves, enter a blind alley or become completely blind because we do not want and cannot see beyond our interests, our passions and our calculations. It is not even a life in black and white. Everything is all grey.

But suddenly, he hears an unusual commotion, a new buzz of conversation. It is not coming from the people who are coming out of the Synagogue nor is it coming from those who are going to the market. It is coming from people who are calling out always more strongly the name of Jesus. He bursts out and cannot restrain himself any longer and starts shouting in such a way that no one could calm him down. There in front of him there is light, there is life, he is passing. I do not want any money; I cannot bear this closed horizon any more.

Jesus notices him and asks the people to call him. Those, who grumbled because Jesus had to interrupt his sermon because of his shouting, called him although they felt a bit humiliated. You have shouted so much that you have annoyed us but now get up, move on, he is calling you. Amidst the desire for Jesus, the intuition that He is there and the meeting which brings out the fullness of life, there are some who are converted and act as a go-between between him and Jesus. He exceeds all limits of prudence, he does not bother that he is banging his head against a wall; he throws down his cloak: Lord that I may see again. And Jesus: your faith has saved you and the blind man starts seeing. He asked for that gift with all his might and Jesus could not deny him his request. He leapt up with all his might back to a full life.

We could compare our life to that of this poor blind man. To be able to see we need at least three things: good eyes, something to see and light. The blind man had something important missing: good eyes. But we, what do we lack? Our eyes are there, beautiful to look at, eyewash, make-up, spectacles, contact lenses, false eyelashes, piercing and brilliantine for the hair so that, at least, if one does not look at our eyes, he may look somewhere near. The things for us to see are there: beautiful boys, beautiful girls, works of art, the beauty of nature and of the coming spring. Light there is. So nothing is missing. I do not need Jesus. I am not interested in Him. But are we so sure that we are seeing everything clearly? Are we sure that our horizon is wide enough to let us see life's truths as they truly are? Do we succeed in seeing the way we should take so as

to become mature people? Do we see the good side of people or only their bad side? Do our eyes help us to understand our friend's heart, the heart of someone who swears on the gospel that he loves us and then looks for evidence to deceive us and to see how he can cheat us? Do we know how to find out whether there is love in the person next to me?

Here everything is missing: eyes, things and light. **The Holy Spirit** is the light which helps me to look deeply into life and to avoid being superficial. We are blind in these areas because we accept all the stupidities presented on TV or through the Internet. Has it ever happened to you that when you enter a room, after having being out in the sun, for a while you do not see anything? The same happens in our outlook towards life. Dazzled by emptiness, we do not succeed in seeing that which is true, beautiful and that which counts. But above all we do not succeed in seeing God's call which alone can fill our hearts with happiness. Only **the Holy Spirit** is this new light.

What do we have to do to establish contact with this light, where is the plug? It is the Gospel and with this Gospel, Catholic Action has made itself available to be the meter, the source and the power station. It lets the Holy Spirit work in it and offers itself to the Church to carry out this great lay vocation.

## **2. Arise, He is calling you**

This is the comment, which the Pope passed on this vocation, to the ACR children (Children's Catholic Action) last Christmas. "I know that this year you are reflecting on the invitation made to Bartimaeus: "Arise, He is calling you". You too should hear this call everyday. When your mother or father wakes you up in the morning to go to school, it is always a new: wake up! At times, it is true that it is not so easy to listen and the reply is not always immediate. I do not only appeal to you to answer promptly but to see in those words a call from someone else who wishes you well. It is a call from God to live your life, to be Christian boys and girls, to start a new day, which is a great gift from Him, to meet so many friends, like you, to learn, to do good and also to thank God for all He has given you. In the morning, when you wake up, remember also your great Friend Jesus by saying a prayer. I hope that you do this everyday!

The invitation "Arise, He is calling you" has been repeated many times in your lives and is being repeated even today. The first call was made to you when you were given the gift of life. Always take care of this great gift, appreciate it, be grateful to the Lord for it, ask Him to give a happy life to every boy and girl in the world and that they may be always respected and never lack the necessities for a decent living. You have received another important call in your Baptism, even though you do not remember it. At that moment, you became brothers of Jesus, who wishes you well more than anyone else and wants to help you grow. And lastly, another call was made to you when you received your First Holy Communion. On that day, your friendship with Jesus became more intimate and ever since then, He has accompanied you on your life's journey. Dear ACR boys and girls answer our Lord's call to be His friends with generosity and He will never disappoint you! He could call you to give yourself as a gift of love to another person, to set up a family, or He could call you to give your life to Him as a gift of love to Him by becoming priests, consecrated persons or missionaries. Be courageous in your replies to Him as you have stated: «aim high»; you will be happy throughout your whole life! But now, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all your educators, especially those in Catholic Action, and your parents. They are precious because they have helped you and still help you to answer to the Lord's call in your life's journey or rather they undertake the journey with you!"

Even the Pope states that this is Catholic Action's primary task: to intercept and help to make God's call materialize in one's life and in that of the others. How can a Christian be helped to answer to God's call and to his proper vocation? Through formation. We speak so much about formation but ...

## **3. What is formation?**

We will start with some simple questions. How can a Christian community, a parish, a pastoral unity help Christians in becoming mature Christians? The fundamental elements which help us achieve this are: the Word, the Sacraments and human relations. Can they help to foster communion which is a gift of God and which depends on the way we live them and share them? Can they help today's men and women to be faithful to their proper Christian vocation, *to establish a profound bond with the Gospel so as to restart a new life which has Christ as its centre, which*

*keeps Him as the criterion in every human choice and which gives sense to life, something which everybody aspires for?*

In other words we ask: is it possible to answer to the void which we seem to note in today's Christians? We celebrate so many Masses, offer so many sacraments and do so many acts of charity and yet we do not succeed in giving a Christian identity and in giving profound reasons for life as a patrimony for a more genuine humanity and as a message of hope for everybody.

### ***This is not a commercial operation but a pastoral conversion***

During the last ten years, the Bishops' *Pastoral orientations* have encouraged us to become aware of the need of formation and to look for some positive reply. During these years, we have been trying to direct the Christian community to offer experiences to arrive at a convinced and mature faith. *The subject of this formation is the Christian community which* should not go out of its ways to offer some other services, besides those it already offers. It is not a question of marketing but it is simply reaffirming, redefining, converting itself and as such offering everybody a new way of life.

This task is vital for the life of a Christian community; it is not superfluous, unpredictable or of secondary importance. It means *fostering a Christian conscience which brings about a Christian reality*. We cannot satisfy ourselves by having persons interested in sociology, traditions, good and edifying attitudes and action but we want, starting from us, *to model ourselves and our lives on the Gospel, so that all those we meet, may decide to model themselves and their lives on the Gospel*.

This means that we have to take ourselves seriously. We have to realize that we are weak and fragile and that we have to make an effort to rediscover Jesus in the Gospel everyday. We should aim at making the Gospel the reference and the sure link which rules and guides our human experiences and faith's vital source in man's life. Faith is the pivot of our conscience.

As men and women, we, and all those we meet, are men and women, who experience sense of incompleteness, which stems from our desire for fullness. The formation which we suggest is not only a task called for by « the iniquity of our times», it does not stem from the fact that we have to admit that we are helpless when confronted by the cultural confusion and by the invasion of superficiality and deceits through the mass media. It is also a need, an appeal written in humanity's anthropological statute. It is an urge which comes out of the profoundness of our conscience and thus it has to be tackled at this level.

Formation should answer to the urge for truth and happiness which is instilled in human life. Formation means transmitting, communicating and testifying, in a credible and effective way, *reasons for living* in a meaningful way. Christian formation means offering reasons for leading a life worthy of the Gospel. Formation, in its true and higher meaning, is only possible when the sense of the human person is clear and when the main consideration is the absolutely gratuitous dedication to a person's growth. Formation means respecting everyone's freedom to make his own choices, respecting his life, his originality and his history. This genuine dedication to give everyone this space is only possible if there is a mature sense of the human person.

### ***Quality of formation***

Formation is giving a reason for one's life and believing and bringing out all the possible happiness from life and from faith's demanding choices. Formation is that fundamental activity which gives a person the joy of being himself through acquaintances, relations, culturisation, dialogue, communitarian experiences and concrete activities. It is not a professional formation which imparts skills but an ongoing initiation towards life. Formation helps us to incline towards the reasons of happiness in our life as Christians.

When we speak of formation, we do not mean religious socialization, meaning that, at least, one learns the meaning of certain symbols which have been inherited from our secular traditions: the sign of the Cross, feasts, processions, well-known stories... We need to know these if we do not want to feel cut off. We do not want to influence people to belong to this or that group, nor do we want to draw people to become activists in any structure or for any cause, but we wish to enkindle a heart which burns for Jesus and goes beyond its limits for love of the community, knowing that the community is the only way whereby it meets Christ and wherein it can enjoy the fullness of his gifts and his joy, together with all the others.

The communitarian component is absolutely necessary for any message of hope which we wish to convey to men. Thus formation is not self-centred. It is not a titanic exercise in individual

introspection. Neither is it a stage where people are trained to influence the market, nor is it military training to learn how to command and plan strategies. It is the indispensable opening up towards communion with others. There is no place for solitude and auto-concentration. This is the basic principle in the encyclical “*Spe salvi*”.

### ***The strategic place of formation is our personal conscience***

Conscience is not a vague, rhetorical term and much less is it a private matter because conscience presupposes a reference to those aspects of culture where the meanings of living become sociologically relevant and generate a new life, build networks of relations and establish the laws for human co-existence.

Formation is a task which undertakes to structure the dynamisms of our conscience in a methodical way as these have to give a meaning to our experiences continually, in the light of a profound vision of faith. This is a process which is continually going on and there are some critical points or steps which are worth noting:

- It introduces, in a gradual, respectful and delicate way, the question of sense, which is evaluated in relation to truth, which has to be continually rediscovered, reflected upon, questioned but never fully reached,
- It leads to a decisive meeting with the Face of Christ ,
- It expresses the freedom to accept the offer of the gift and to follow the task which is being presented,
- It interplays between values, virtues, sentiments and affections so as to offer an ethical dimension to the whole experience, a good quality for life,
- It always assumes the conviction that, a life of faith leads to human fullness,
- It develops in the logic of losing oneself to find oneself,
- It takes place in the actual, agitated daily life.

## **4. Formation in Catholic Action**

This complicated exercise of living experiences, learning, courses and apprenticeship, is all aimed at the lay Christian who needs formation to live his vocation. A lay person does not live his life side by side with the world but within the world. Lay people live their vocation in the concrete circumstances of daily life, loving their families in married life, in their daily work and following their studies, just as the priests live their vocation when they preside over the Eucharistic Celebration and when they administer the Sacraments. In my opinion, there was an excessive concentration of the laity within the internal life of the Church in this time and thus lay people lost the vision of their baptismal vocation, that of following a full Christian life oriented towards holiness and towards a mission.

Catholic Action tries to counteract this through formation. It is concerned with action, a proposal for commitment. It is dedicating oneself in one’s own life, with all one’s might, towards high ideals. But its main aim is to present profound reasons for this commitment. This creates an image of a lay believer who has certain typical characteristics.

### ***His life is centred on Jesus***

The determining pillar in the life of a Christian is Christ’s mystery, celebrated and lived in the liturgical experience, in the Eucharist and in the Sacraments. These are indispensable gifts which are determinant in his life even when it comes to charity. It is Christ whom we meet, welcome, praise and love in the celebrated liturgy and in the liturgy of our daily life.

The Second Ecumenical Vatican Council urges us to focus on Christ and to go deeply into His mystery when it speaks about two worrying situations: a society, which on a global level, is rapidly going to ignore Christianity. The Christian faithful do not focus on the essential elements of their evangelizing task, a Church is almost sleeping and resting on its traditions without trying to discover the depth of a living Gospel which is Jesus. Faced with this situation, the Council presents the figure of Christ, as the perfect man, risen, restored to His dignity and completely fulfilled, to all people, believers and not. Examples of this are the short Christological reflections which Paul VI gave, after the Council, in His messages, for example the messages to youth on Palm Sundays.

Seriously and profoundly, we have always opted and are determined to keep doing so, to follow and put into practice the directions given by the Council.

It is the desire of every Christian to become like Jesus, to follow His example. The formation aims to educate to love, to live, to grow as He did. Jesus Christ is the person who should be our ideal. The Christian community would be deceiving and impoverishing itself if it accepts to educate a man without taking the figure of Jesus as the defining element of its personality structure.

### ***He has a passion for relationships***

A Catholic Action lay member lives his adherence to Christ in the network of human relations which we all need in order to live, grow and believe. He is not a single person who retires in a convent to follow a road to holiness in contemplation. He is a contemplative on the streets of life and in the making of history. He fills his life with friends, work mates and with his family; with spiritual strains and with the faith, which he shares with others. He uses these relations within the group. He is convinced that we reach God together with others who give us their hand so that together we can reach our goal – sanctity. This journey starts through itineraries which open us up to a decent life which is called to become even heroic. In this way, we respond to our vocation, we orientate our affections, live our family life and find direction for our own life. He understands and lives his faith by turning his communion with others into a privileged place of his life. Love, which is God in the profoundness of the Trinity, and Charity, lived with his brethren, are for him the fullness of his Christian life. A young Catholic Action member cannot live without friends, whom he helps and meets and with whom he grows in the name of Jesus. An adult member does not close himself up in solitary prayer or in private acts of faith but establishes links and creates occasions for God's gift of communion. A child does not only say his morning and evening prayer, kneeling by his bed, but praises the Lord with his group of friends with whom he enjoys himself, communicates and grows.

### ***He loves the Church***

Relationships are fully developed within a wider community: the Church. This is Christ's gift which He gained for us through His passion, death, resurrection and it is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is the people of God, the assembly within which we are called to glorify the Lord, to celebrate the living memory, to meet the Risen Christ, to ask for His pardon and to strengthen our life with grace, through the Sacraments. It is a concrete Church, made up of living beings, incarnated within a territory. It is open to all and the only requirement to live as part of this great family of God is Baptism. It has its priest, who is not chosen but received and loved and its traditions are continually being purified through the listening to the Word of God. It is guided by the Pope, to whom it promises faithfulness and obedience in faith and who bases his trust, attachment and attention on faith. It is lead by the Bishop who, in union with the Pope, represents the fundamental point of reference of its faith and the correct way of living one's faith. Catholic Action members dedicate their lives to the diocesan church and know that the mystery of the church is expressed through their actual everyday life. They are proud of its faith, of the lives of its saints, of the examples of holy people who have served and loved it. It is a church made up of living real people, those whom we meet everyday. It is a church which lives with the dedication of its lay people, who do not aspire for power but have a strong desire to serve. It works on projects and pastoral plans which are carried out with generosity, intelligence.

### ***He has the courage of giving witness and of being of service in the territory***

The gift of faith, received by CA members, is offered to all gratuitously. They give witness to it in their environment and they share it so that the world may be saved by the Gospel and that the Gospel may inspire life and history. People need the Gospel. None of us can live without the Gospel. Every human problem can be solved if man's heart is able to open up to God. The great human disasters happen because we have abandoned the greatest resource of our lives and of the life of the universe: God's love. The discovery and the proposal of this patrimony has to be made in lay terms, with human and understandable words, clear actions, true dialogue and great rationality. The world does not need ideological impositions but, through reason and understanding, it needs to consider its limitations. Only thus can we be witnesses and agents of change when it comes to customs and ideals. There is no Catholic Action without commitment in the world, without a decision to transform institutions, always along the lines of the Gospel which

alone can offer inspiration and strength. There is no Catholic Action if there is no commitment to incarnate the social teaching of the Church in institutions. It is not enough to be Catechists. We have to be involved in civil life, in administration, in politics for the common good, in organisms which call for civil participation and in all daily historical events. The Gospel has to be the severe judge on personal interests in public matters. It has to inspire our social projects and safeguard the interests of the poor. It is absolutely necessary to guide our discernment in our choices both daily and extraordinary.

## Appendix

**This is the concrete image of a Catholic Action which listens to God and to the Church, is incarnated in real life and is missionary**

Simple unquestionable or vital qualities which help to understand why a Christian community should commit itself to set up Catholic Action or to sustain it if already set up.

*It is easier to state this by defining who CA members are*

They are Christians who get together regularly and freely to be ever more themselves as baptised in the Christian community and in the world. They qualify themselves by adopting an associative structure which helps them to live as Christians concretely in their daily life, at their places of work, in their professions and in all their relations, as written in their new DNA impressed upon them in Baptism.

It is important to know that they are part of a stable association which provides clear objectives, strong relations, a way of life, formation programmes, a visible and recognisable image and an opportunity to join others in the name of the Gospel.

- They have been baptised, they have been fascinated by the beauty of living the Gospel within a wide network of relations and follow rules which transform enchantment into a distinctive, daily, challenging, expressible choice suitable for any age-group or state of life. They are definitely not Christians by chance because they have answered to a call which for them becomes a project which helps them to grow.

- They discover that being a believer in today's world entails allowing fixed times for reviewing one's life, for training, to assume responsibilities, for planning projects and for sharing fraternal friendship. They believe that alone they are helpless, together, they support one another and God is in their midst.

Through demanding apprenticeships in groups, they are trained to assume responsibility. An association presents specific accountable responsibilities, and planned activities which are part of a wider project.

- They are aware that many men and women are searching for a sense in their lives. They have found the way to discover this, so they organise themselves, discuss and equip themselves to make it known to others. They weigh the questions which people ask about their existence, their work and their human relations and together they find a way of living their faith which is easily understood by all.

They help each other in the study of the realities around them in the light of the Gospel and pass this on to the Church and to all those who wish to follow Christ.

- Through their own experience, they know that the younger generation find it difficult to direct their lives towards true, solid and worthy things but at the same time they know that young people aim at high ideals. So they get together in order to present the younger generation with a feasible experience of living as a Christian. They also offer to help in arousing in children an enthusiasm to get to know Jesus Christ and to live as Christian protagonists. They know that children have an unthinkable aptitude to love God.

They dedicate themselves to the education of children with full responsibility and try to involve the family, society and the Church in this work.

- They know that the Church is constituted on a principle of responsibility so they decide to collaborate strictly with the Church even to the point of modifying their own plans and

abandoning the priorities of their association in order to collaborate with their pastors in carrying the weight of this responsibility.

They are a force which shares, facilitates, helps and works on the pastoral project of its proper church even before undertaking its own.

- They have understood that social life is complex and needs a soul. The challenge of giving a soul to our economy, to our social life and to our culture can only be taken up by someone who takes the gospel as the basis for discussion, for deeper study, for support and for fostering communion precisely as an association.

One cannot present any proposals to society by himself, so, as an association, members work together, present their joint analysis, their points of view based on their past history of involvement and life experience and on our tradition. Better still if true life experiences of individuals and situations can be presented.

- Many spheres are practically cut off from knowing Jesus and so CA members should prepare themselves to share in the anxieties and joys, the projects and the efforts that prevail in all these spheres so as to be able to spread the beauty of the Gospel therein.

Above all, they realize that today people are grouping themselves in so many little worlds, according to the areas where they live or according to their likes. CA has created specialized structures which help to take the news of the Gospel to these worlds and situations. The Movements have the task of being present in the world, in the Church and in the association.

- They decide to be of service in the basic structures of the Christian community, the diocese and in all its components such as the parish. They offer their service in order to make it more welcoming and to be a home and a school where communion and truly Christian living prevail.

The most important service to the Christian community is to make it welcoming for everyone and in all aspects, parishes, diocese and pastoral unities, paying special attention to the basic groups where everyone, without any distinction, may attend. The church is not made up of different groups or associations which come together but it is one people brought together through baptism or through a desire for conversion.

- But, most important of all, they have understood that it is possible to be a Christian today only in one way: that of being a saint. So they have decided to set up a gymnasium which helps them to train for holiness with time allotted to exercises, training, dialogue, apprenticeship, talks and competitions. Every parish should have its own gymnasium, well-planned, well-kept and well-equipped with holy people connected to the communion of saints.

Catholic Action forms specialists in holiness, not in pastoral work and much less to serve in the sacristy. To achieve this it presents its members with a rule for life.

CA forms part of the basic structure of the Church and so it is presented as a vocation, a call from the Spirit, which anyone may choose freely. Priests, Pastoral Councils and Priests' Councils, who promote the basic structures within the Church, should feel that it is their responsibility to make this vocation known.