

Report of Ifca's activities (1997-2000)

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Dear friends,

we have just concluded the Congress of Catholic Laity and celebrated the Jubilee for the Laity together with Peter's Successor. We have also just finished living this powerful experience of a Universal Church. This takes me back to another ecclesial event which has left an imprint on the history of the laity and which is intimately linked to IFCA's birth: the Bishops' Synod on the Vocation and Mission of the Laity.

Following the clear conciliar teaching on Catholic Action, the Synod Fathers have confirmed, together with the richness of the new lay movements and associations which have risen in the Church, the permanence of this particular form of organized apostolate which is Catholic Action. The Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici* defines it as that lay association, led by laypeople, with a particular style of formation and called "to be of service through their faithfulness and good works to promote the growth of the entire Christian community, pastoral activities and infusing every aspect of life with the gospel spirit" (CFL 31).

During those days of the Synod, representatives from Catholic Action national associations from different countries took the initiative to start a fruitful dialogue and an exchange of experiences. The aim was to establish how each country, according to its own realities and in keeping with the pastoral plans of the different local Churches, lives this common associative identity.

These first meetings went on and with the help and encouragement of the Pontifical Council for the Laity (PCL) - through its President Eduardo Francisco Cardinal Pironio - the Forum saw its beginning. It was to be the place where Catholic Action met, exchanged ideas, and worked for its promotion, in special communion with the Pope and the Bishops.

Thus on 9 November 1991 the Forum's Constitutional Assembly of the Associations and Federations of Catholic Action Movements, made up of national lay associations which simultaneously bear the four notes laid down in AA 20 and in *Christifideles Laici* n. 31, simultaneously met and approved the Provisional Normative Document. The founder member countries of IFCA which signed the constitution are Spain, Austria, Malta, Italy, Romania (Byzantine rite), Mexico, Paraguay and Argentina.

The first Secretariat made up of Austria, Spain, Italy, Mexico and Argentina was formed. While recalling these first developments of the Forum, I would like to remember its first Coordinator, Engineer Marcelo Zapiola, President of the Argentine Catholic Action, who led the Forum in its early days and who was called to the Lord on 9th December 1994.

After the Constituting Assembly, a process of consultation was started with the Episcopal Conferences of the member countries which contributed towards the formulation of the final Normative Document. This was approved during the First ordinary Assembly held in Vienna in October 1994. During this Assembly Colombia, Venezuela and Switzerland (Lugano) were accepted as members.

The Pontifical Council for the Laity approved the Normative Document *ad experimentum* for 3 years on the 25th June 1995, and recently, on 3rd January 2000, it gave it definite approval, recognizing IFCA as an international organism.

The aim of the International Forum of Catholic Action is:

- to be a place where Catholic Action associations from different countries and regions can meet and support one another,
- to analyse the worldwide dimension of the problems which contemporary society poses to the Church and to Catholic Action,
- to animate and promote "the new evangelization" keeping in view the structural and pastoral realities of each Catholic Action association.

Catholic Action has its own peculiar identity, it is linked to individual dioceses, and is fully inserted in diocesan and national pastoral work. The Forum, therefore, is not an organism

which gives directives or which conditions the actual running of local Catholic Action. It is fundamentally an organ which helps to promote initiatives aimed at supporting and strengthening the specific service which CA should carry out in the various historical, cultural and social contexts, particularly its commitment in the formation of laypeople.

IFCA started its journey in Rome in 1991, was strengthened in Vienna in 1994, and developed further during the Second ordinary Assembly held in Buenos Aires in September 1997 when Albania, Myanmar, Burundi, Luxembourg and Peru were accepted as members.

The Assembly in Buenos Aires drew up the following lines of action for the three years, which followed:

- to promote CA especially in those countries where it does not exist,
- to encourage solidarity and cooperation among the member countries thus favouring exchange of experiences,
- to encourage the participation of young people,
- to animate and promote the new evangelization, keeping in view the structural and pastoral realities of each CA,
- to intensify collaboration and dialogue between IFCA and Pastors, both with the Episcopal Conferences as well as with the organisms of the Holy See.

In order to realize these guidelines, the Secretariat, composed of Mexico, Italy, Spain, Romania and Argentina, took the following initiatives:

Secretariat meetings

The Secretariat met for the first time in Rome in November 1997, when it chose its Coordinator and asked the PLC to appoint the Ecclesiastical Assistant, a post which was vacant due to the nomination of Mgr. De Giorgi as Cardinal Archbishop of Palermo.

Mgr. Agostino Superbo, General Ecclesiastical Assistant of Italian Catholic Action was nominated to fill this post.

Following this, the Secretariat met, more or less, in connection with other activities on the following dates and in the places as shown:

- May 1998 in Rome
- July 1998 in Iasi, Romania
- September 1998 in Rome
- April 1999 in Mexico
- October 1999 in Rome
- May 2000 in Rome
- November 2000 in Rome

Continental meetings

The following Continental meetings were held in preparation for the Jubilee:

- from the 31st July to the 2nd August 1998, the Second IFCA's European Continental Meeting was held at the Seminar in Iasi, Romania. The theme chosen was: Christ our Saviour, yesterday, today and forever - Christians and Christian communities a sign of hope for Europe. Ways of formation and mission of the laity in different contexts. The meeting coincided with the European Bishops' Second Special Assembly and with the preparations for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. This meeting was attended by representatives of IFCA's member and observer countries: Spain, Italy, Switzerland (Italian), Malta, Slovakia, Moldova Republic, Romania (Greek and Latin rite) and representatives from MIDADE. The fact that the meeting place was Romania, an East European country, showed clearly the commitment of CA members towards building a united Europe extending "from the Atlantic to the Urals". Before this meeting, the members of the Secretariat visited AGRU, the Greek rite Rumanian Catholic Action whose central office is in Cluj.
- From the 6th to the 11th April 1999, the Third American Meeting was held in Mexico

City on the theme chosen for the American Bishops' Synod Special Assembly: Our meeting with Christ in today's America invites us towards conversion, communion and solidarity, and shows the love of the Father. The meeting was focused on the work of Catholic Action in the light of the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in America*.

Representatives from member countries in the continent: Mexico, Venezuela, Columbia, Peru, Paraguay and Argentina together with the members of the Secretariat attended this meeting. Ecuador, Panama, USA, Cuba in exile, and MIDADE's regional representative attended as observers.

- From the 26th to the 29th April 2000, IFCA Secretariat organized a Seminar on the theme: You shall be my witnesses in Africa. Reality, challenges and prospects for laypeople's formation. Catholic Action's contribution. This meeting was held at the Resurrection Garden in Nairobi (Kenya). This initiative has marked the first step towards IFCA's regional work in Africa starting from Catholic Action's reality in the countries with whom IFCA is already in contact and in those interested in reflecting on the formation of the laity and in the setting up of Catholic Action. In view of the Jubilee Year, reference was constantly made on one hand to Vatican Council II and to other post-conciliar stages like the Synod on the laity (CFL), the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (RM) and the African continental Synod (*Ecclesia in Africa*); and on the other to the report on the reality in the particular Churches in the African continent, the participation of laypeople - especially that of members of associations and movements - and Catholic Action's contribution. Bishops, priests and lay people from Kenya (Nairobi, Nyeri, Murang'a), Burundi (Gitega, Bururi, Ruyigi), Rwanda (Kibungo) Uganda (Lugazi, Masaka), the Republic of Central Africa (Bangui), Togo (Lome), Sudan, Guinea, Bissau, attended this Seminar. Members of the Secretariat from Argentina, Italy and Romania also attended. Representatives from international organizations present in Africa: UNUM OMNES, MIDADE, IYCS and Pax Romana were also present.
- The third European Continental meeting due to be held in Czestochowa, Poland on the theme: Lay people, members of Catholic Action, witnesses of the Risen Christ in Europe of the Third Millennium, has been postponed. This meeting was meant to reflect on Catholic Action's contribution to the Assembly of the Bishops' Synod for Europe.

Youth participation

In order to encourage the participation of youth in all IFCA's activities, financial help has been given to representatives of youth sections and member countries have been advised to make this possible.

The following activities specifically for young people have been organized:

- The First Week of Formation for Youths was held in August 1998 in Iasi, Romania just after the European Continental Meeting. Young people from Spain, Italy, Switzerland (Italian), Slovakia, Moldova Republic, Romania (Greek and Latin rites) took part.
- The Second Week of Formation for Youths was held between the 22nd and the 26th September 1999 in Oradea, Romania. Young people from Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, Ukraine, Moldova Republic, Spain, Italy, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Austria, Malta and Bosnia-Herzegovina attended this meeting.

We are convinced of the importance of organizing a youth section in IFCA and of creating some form of co-ordination among them. A few steps have been taken in this direction but these have to be consolidated in the coming three years.

Relations with various countries

- In November 1987, IFCA participated in the Meeting for Laypeople in preparation for

the apostolic journey of Pope John Paul II in Cuba and in the Week of Formation for the Laity in November 1998, also in Cuba.

- In May 1998, we participated in the Meeting for Catholic Laity in Poland.
- IFCA representatives took part in the Catholic Action Assembly of Paraguay and Argentina.
- Relations between Italy and Byzantine rite dioceses in Romania have continued.
- Italian Catholic Action has continued with its initiatives towards the formation of the laity in Albania.
- In February 1999, the Second Seminar on formation for Catholic Action's members in Myanmar was held.

Relations with other international organizations

From the 2nd to the 3rd September 1998 IFCA held the first familiarization meeting with the representatives from WUCWO (World Union of Catholic Women Organizations) and UNUM OMNES/ICCM

(International Council of Catholic Men).

The theme of the meeting was: Guided by the Holy Spirit - IFCA - WUCWO - ICCM towards the third millennium. This Meeting was conducted by Thomas Spidlik SJ theologian on eastern Christianity and Dr. Stella Morra, theologian and sociologist. These dealt with the spiritual and ecclesial dimension of lay organizations in the light of the teaching of Vatican II and Christifideles Laici in preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. In this context each organization gave information about its history, members, aims, activities and future prospects. In the workshops the common elements and the possibility of mutual support and collaboration were discussed. In the final recommendations a proposal was made to continue with initiatives of collaboration among the three international organizations.

This meeting was also attended by Lucienne Sallé, the PLC representative who, in her intervention, encouraged these initiatives and highlighted the important part played by Catholic Action in the ecclesial communion and made interesting proposals as to how these joint initiatives could continue.

As a result of this first meeting, the relations among these organizations at regional level and stronger participation in initiatives taken by them are expected to develop further.

With MIDADE - International Movement for apostolic work among children - we have kept close contact and have taken part in all the meetings held by both organizations.

A request for IFCA's acceptance in ICO (International Catholic Organizations) has been made, in accordance with all the requisites laid down in their statute. The decision will be taken in the forthcoming ICO General Assembly, which will be held in December 2001.

Relations with the Pontifical Council for the Laity

During the Secretariat's meetings held in Rome, we have always kept contact with the PCL, through meetings with Card. Stafford as well as with Mgr Rylko, Guzman Carriquiry and Lucienne Sallé.

We have always accepted the invitations from the PLC to take part in the various activities organized by the Council. Among these were the Meeting with the Movements and the New ecclesial Communities in May 1998, the Convention and the Jubilee of the Third Age held on 16th/17th September 2000, the preparatory meetings for the Third World Youth Day and the recent Congress of Catholic Laity. A Rumanian young person took part in the Youth Forum held in August 2000 just before World Youth Day, as IFCA's representative.

Relations with the Pastors of the various local Churches

IFCA's Secretariat and Italian Catholic Action have contacted the Bishops to familiarize them with IFCA and its ecclesial services. In doing this they availed themselves of the opportunity of the presence in Rome of Bishops from the various dioceses of all the regions of the world in connection with Synodal Assemblies, visits ad limina or in connection with the various jubilees.

Publications

- On the occasion of the first anniversary of the death of Eduardo Cardinal Pironio, a booklet entitled "Magnificat" which gathers some of his contributions to IFCA has been published in Italian, English, French and Spanish.
- A "Newsletter" giving information about IFCA, the conclusions arrived at during the various meetings and information about the different countries has continued to be published on a half-yearly basis.
- A leaflet with information on the nature of IFCA in English, French, Spanish, Italian and Rumanian has been published. In the near future a translation into Swahili and Kirundi is expected and hopefully with everybody's help other translations will be possible. We maintain that this has been a very valid means of presenting IFCA.
- A new revised edition of VADEMECUM has been published. This includes a general introduction about IFCA, a synthesis of the teachings of the Church on Catholic Action, and a chapter dedicated to Catholic Action in each of the member countries. At the end of these three years, member countries are being asked to update the information given previously. The original version of this VADEMECUM in Spanish, English and Italian was presented at the Assembly in Buenos Aires. Now it has also been translated into French.
- The Documents concerning the Second ordinary Assembly held in Buenos Aires have been published. The Italian, English and Spanish versions have been sent to all the member countries and this material has been used as reference in the preparation for this Assembly.
- The Documents concerning WUCWO - ICCM and IFCA meeting in Italian, English, French and Spanish held in September 1998 as well as those of the African Seminar held in April 2000 have been published.
- During these three years many national, diocesan and parish associations have started publishing their WEB site page, this being an important means of communication. Among its tasks, the new IFCA secretariat has to attempt setting up an IFCA web site.

Financial support

The financial contribution by IFCA's members has proved absolutely insufficient to cover the expenses of the ever-increasing activities organized during these last three years. The ordinary day to day running of the Secretariat has depended on the contribution received from the Pius XII Foundation.

The funding of the various initiatives has depended on the extraordinary financial help received from the following organizations:

- Renovabis - for the organization of the First Week of Formation for Youths in Iasi in 1998.
- Pontifical Commission for Latin America - for the Third American Continental Meeting.

In both cases the contribution went towards the travelling expenses and lodging of participants.

For this Assembly we have received contributions from:

- Propaganda Fide
- Solidarity Fund for the Jubilee
- Pius XII Foundation
- Some Catholic Action national organizations who have given a contribution as a sign of solidarity.

I feel I must point out that Italian Catholic Action has provided the venue and forked out the expenses for the functioning of the Secretariat and all the publications provided. We also rely on the contribution of those countries, which besides paying their subscription fee also pay the travelling expenses and lodging of the member of the Secretariat from their country.

Up to this point we have presented, in brief, the functioning of the Secretariat during the three years 1997/2000.

IFCA's enlargement during this period, as can be seen from the number of observer countries

who are taking part in this Assembly, presents new challenges, which the new Secretariat has to face. These include finding new ways of organization, administration and funding, which will provide a wider and better way of communicating and render the service which the Forum should provide more effective.

We wish to express our thanks to Italian Catholic Action for the support it gives to IFCA's Secretariat and especially to Maria Grazia Tibaldi, who with her generous dedication and help has made many of our dreams come true. Also to Anna Meucci for her priceless collaboration in the Secretariat's activities, and to Don Salvatore Niciteretse who helped to make the initiatives taken in Africa possible.

May the Lord recompense their generosity.

Our assembly

We now start the Third ordinary Assembly on the theme: The lasting actuality of a gift of the Holy Spirit - Catholic Action: lay faithful who live the ever newness of the Gospel and are a sign of communion.

This Assembly is meeting 35 years from the conclusion of Vatican II (8 December 1965) and we wish it to be a special moment for us. In the spirit of the jubilee as indicated to us by Pope John Paul II, we should renew ourselves in the light of the Council and purify ourselves from "infidelity, inconsistency and slowness" during these years, not only on a personal level but also as Catholic Action.

For this reason, when we presented the preparatory itinerary for this Assembly, we meant it to be an occasion for us to reflect with sincerity on our fidelity to this gift of the Holy Spirit, on our fidelity to Catholic Action's conciliar identity and to this historic moment, to local realities, to our country, to our region and also to the global reality which affects us all.

This Third IFCA ordinary Assembly should be an occasion to reflect on the identity of our organism, to examine us with regard to the initiatives we have undertaken so that we may be able to look ahead with hope, courage and joy at whatever the new millennium has in store for us.

May this spirit prevail these days, as we prepare ourselves for our Jubilee Day and for the meeting with the Holy Father. We ask Our Lord, through the intercession of so many saints, blessed and friends in the communion of saints, to give us an open heart and mind to love humanity and understand current events, so that we may participate fully in the life of the Church. May we be the Church with that specific ministry which distinguishes us, and which has inspired us to choose as theme for our Assembly in this Jubilee Year on the threshold of the third millennium: The lasting actuality of a gift of the Holy Spirit - Catholic Action: lay faithful who live the ever newness of the Gospel and are a sign of communion.

In concluding, I would like to recall with love and gratitude Eduardo Cardinal Pironio who has done so much for Catholic Action and for IFCA. He was a truly spiritual father and a dear friend. We know that now, while contemplating the face of the Father, in the communion of saints, he is watching over us.

III Ordinary Assembly - Rome, December 2nd-6th 2000

Catholic Action: lay faithful who live the ever newness of the Gospel and are a sign of communion

THE LASTING ACTUALITY OF A GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT