

## **Catholic Action's identity in today's ecclesial and pastoral context**

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It is a pleasure for me to take part in this Third Ordinary Assembly of Catholic Action's International Forum. The Jubilee Year 2000 is also a special occasion for Catholic Action in its journey to enhance its identity. Catholic Action is living and developing in an ecclesial and pastoral context, as well as in the context of the challenges coming from the world in which we live.

I am grateful for this invitation to share with you this Assembly's experience; it is a wonderful occasion wherein I can enrich myself spiritually and learn from the varied ways of expression of Catholic Action in the world. This presentation is, for various reasons, incomplete. Firstly, I will not deal with the ecclesiology of communion and its effects on the vocation and mission of the Christian faithful starting with the baptismal reality, as underlined in *Christifideles Laici*. This is the theological picture without which one cannot understand what I am presenting in this dissertation. Secondly, we cannot ignore the celebration of the World Congress of Catholic Laity, which was held in Rome last week. From it we should take the fundamental guidelines and indications.

There are three points which I would like to highlight, and which I think we should consider. The first is the Holy Father's insistence to re-read and study the decrees of Vatican II. The second, the participants' experiences which brought together the consciousness of a crisis situation and the presence of new and great challenges together with an attitude of hope, trust and communion. Thirdly I think there has been a repetition of the feeling that there is an imbalance between the presence of the laity in the world against that within the Church. There is an absence of lay people in public life, in the secular sphere. I think that we should keep these facts in mind during the proceedings of this International Forum of Catholic Action.

I would like my words to be simply a brotherly voice, conditioned by the reality - both secular and ecclesial - of the Latin American continent where Catholic Action's history has had its light and dark moments, varying according to the country concerned. Actually, in places where it is organized, it is conscious both of the challenges presented by a world which is undergoing great and fast changes and of the ecclesial challenges regarding the ecclesiology of communion, how it has been received and has been maturing in the Christians' conscience: this is an essential key to live one's faith as laid down in Vatican Council II.

In order to penetrate the identity of Catholic Action on the threshold of the third millennium, an analysis and discernment which goes beyond the limits of any ecclesial organization is essential. One of IFCA's most significant efforts, right from its very beginning, has been the sincere and unprejudiced effort to establish its place and its justified existence in today's pluralistic world and in the Church.

What is the Church and what does it say about itself? How does a Christian go about living his secular reality? This is the context in which every baptized person should live the faith.

Evidently, this can materialize in various ways. "Far from being an evil, the diversity in forms of association is a manifestation of the sovereign freedom of the Holy Spirit, who respects and encourages different tendencies, temperaments, vocations, abilities, etc. present in humanity" (John Paul II "Osservatore Romano" 24-3-94, *Ecclesia*, 2681 (1994) 618).

We shoulder this responsibility both personally and as a community. This diversity of ministries and services which complement one another is neither an addition nor a substitute to lay faithful's activity. Lay people too carry out the same mission entrusted by Christ to the Church. All of us here present know the criteria which establish the ecclesiality of the lay faithful's associations: the primacy given to holiness and to the perfection of charity; commitment to the responsible profession of the Catholic faith; participation in the apostolic goal of the Church in human society; and the witness to a concrete communion with the Pope and with one's own Bishop.

Catholic Action, in adopting these four "notes", has always distinguished itself in the close collaboration it has always kept with the hierarchy, and with having "as its goal the evangelization and sanctification of our brethren, the Christian formation of people's consciences, and the religious revival of society" (John Paul II, *ibid.*).

Bearing in mind these characteristics which are proper to Catholic Action, I would like to share

with you certain queries which, in America, are felt as challenges to the Church. The Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in America* states: "The renewal of the Church in America will not be possible without the active presence of the laity"... "Thanks to the lay faithful, the presence and the mission of the Church in the world is carried out in a special way, through the different charisms and ministries of the laity. The secular character is a typical and proper feature of the lay people. It conditions their spirituality and their activity in the family, social, working, cultural and political spheres and makes them responsible for their evangelization. In a continent where competition, inclination to violence, consumption without moderation and corruption are prevalent, lay people are called to introduce strong evangelical values such as compassion, forgiveness, honesty, transparency and patience in the difficult situations encountered. Lay people are expected to show great creative strength in their behaviour and works, thus presenting a way of life which is in tune with the Gospel". (n. 44 passim).

This long quotation from the Pope's words emphasises the conflict that arises for a Christian in the midst of dramatic situations which ask for the supreme commandment of love. A spirituality endowed with virtues adapted to the present hard times in which we are living needs to be designed and implemented. According to the writings of Cardinal Martini, the Christian needs three fundamental virtues. The first is intellectual honesty, which means an aspiration to a deep understanding of the problems which have to be faced. This honesty should be a way of life, enquiry, and cultural expression. The second is unlimited courage. A courage which does not arise from terror (as a result of violence, poverty, authoritarianism...), but from a search for reconciliation and serious dialogue. The biggest evil that threatens humanity is the moral chaos which burdens the universe. And the third virtue is interior freedom from the chains of violence in all its forms. This freedom can only result from a true interior and exterior education. Through ascetics, man has to learn how to transform himself into a "master of self", overcoming and renouncing himself (cf Carlo Maria Martini "Dreaming of a Europe of the Spirit" Ed. BAC 2000 Madrid pp. 9-11).

The Christian of the third millennium is faced with a new world, unknown in many of its expressions, hostile or far from the fundamental parameters of Christianity. Secularism and the religious, plurality, relativism, light culture and the plagues of poverty and exploitation present great challenges.

How can we live as Christians in the new future? Celam 2000 report has this to say: "...there may be a stronger awareness that all of us constitute the Church, and share her mission to the world. Nevertheless in daily life by the word "Church" we continue to refer to bishops, priests, and members of the consecrated life... But the majority of baptized persons do not fully realize the responsibility they carry in the mission of the Church... One needs to go back to the image of the Church as People of God... It is necessary to regain the vision of the Bishops' Synod upon lay people, where they highlighted the ordinary condition of a Christian as an active subject of communion and as an active agent in the mission of the Church" (*The Third Millennium as a Pastoral challenge*, Celam, Bogotá 1999, pp 88-89).

All this shows the real situation in the world and in the Church. The virtue of intellectual honesty requires that we know where we are to search for new ways. This is the only way to give body to a spirituality of courage and interior freedom and to build Christian hope: to hope against all hopes, to build the heavenly city in the midst of the earthly city, to open paths to Resurrection starting from the memory of the Passion.

Here the Catholic Action of the future should place itself.

### **What does the future have in store for us?**

Nowadays nothing is planned without a previous study of the possible situations which may be faced, with all their possibilities, limits, and contradictions. The future is built on the foundations we give to politics, economics, and industry... All the more we cannot think of building the Church of tomorrow, as well as the survival of the Christian or the religious in the future without a similar exercise. Nothing could be closer than the spirituality we consider most traditional with regard to time. "Eternity has entered into time" as John Paul II has reminded us (TMA 9). History, for the believer, is a pilgrimage in which the action of the Holy Spirit is realized. The future of human history lies in God's present time: it is the hour of God which conveys his grace. For this reason we should discern the signs of the times to discover the signs of God.

The first dramatic sign of our times is the increasing poverty which is affecting an enormous

percentage of the world population. Together with poverty, inequality has also increased. If poverty affects us to the extent of lacking basic needs, inequality creates distances and barriers between the different categories of society. The annual budget of some European football clubs is bigger than the annual budget of some countries of the world!

It is very easy to fall into the wrong conclusion of putting the blame of poverty on the victims themselves. Grave poverty arises from the corruption and inefficiency of the élite in poor countries. There is some truth in this. But this is not the overall answer, since this does not explain the presence of poverty in rich countries. It is not true that richer countries are not corrupt. The richest are the most corrupt. There is no corruption without both categories being involved. From the point of view which concerns us, it is necessary to reach the root cause of poverty. Just as a sick or weak human body is more prone to illness while a healthy body resists, the same happens with poverty: rich societies have more defences (economic, political, cultural) than poor societies.

What can we do? What influence can we exercise to better the situation? I shall start from the religious perspective, from the creation or amplification of the Christian charity. We live in an unpredictable world where a lack of stable equilibrium prevails. The conflicts in the Middle East and the illegal immigrants in Europe are a proof of this. We need to move towards a global agreement for the defence of people and countries who are faced with uncertainty. We need to establish a policy against poverty and inequality promoting above all education and health. A second challenge comes from technology and its impact on the future. The repercussions, both positive and negative of the scientific and technological developments at the end of the 20th century speak for themselves. We can summarise these developments under three aspects: energy, information and reproduction. Today we know that matter and energy are two aspects of the same reality. Energy is the source of all life, but at the same time it is the drive behind all destruction. The human race with today's progress goes beyond its mental ability. We are witnessing a revolution in the field of information. Access to information and to its use are bringing about great changes in socioeconomic relations. In the near future having access to information will be more important than material possessions. And lastly, the continuity of species presents two aspects: biological and cultural. We inherit not only that which is transmitted to us genetically, but also the cultural heritage accumulated by our ancestors. The possibility of intervening on mechanisms of genetic information opens up a vast field which we cannot ignore.

The situation and developments in the areas indicated above will have an extraordinary impact on individual and collective groups of people in the next ten years. It is true that these have great positive potentials, but we can also imagine the deviating attempts to exploit and control human beings. The use of technology is positive if it helps the advancement of authentically human progress. True ethical judgment should underlie the aim, the implementation, and the service given. Here we are faced again with the problem regarding the relation between science and faith. Faith does not fill in the gap to explain that which science cannot explain. It helps us to discover the message of God's love and his solidarity with us. Faith does not give the "what" but rather the "why" of circumstances. Believing does not change our knowing. It should change our attitude. "To expect that faith should oblige us not to accept reliable scientific evidence amounts to a complete misunderstanding of the nature of faith. On the contrary, changing scientific truths into basic values, and therefore expecting that anything that is scientifically possible is good, results in a misunderstanding of the real nature of human destiny, individual needs, and collective existence".

The fact that the Church relies on a hierarchy and on qualified lay people who are able to establish new relations between faith and daily life plays an important part here. It is the challenge of creativity. Together with the different ministries and charisms, we are responsible for the building of the Church. Is not this a fertile field for Catholic Action? Its nearness to the hierarchy leads Catholic Action to look for new ways, areas and methods of evangelization.

### **The Church we dream of**

The phrase for which Martin Luther King has become well known, and which was more recently resumed by Cardinal Hume and Cardinal Martini, surely deals with authentic Christian hope. It is one of the most significant virtues of Latin American popular Catholicism. Believing against all hope, smiling amidst adverse circumstances, sharing generously in situations where poverty prevails: this is one of the commitments undertaken recently by the Church in Latin America.

"The society in which we leave you has its light and shade, its avenues and alleys, its parks and outskirts. Before the young people, we commit ourselves to enkindle more lights and fade away shadows. But most important of all, we leave them the gift of faith, so that with God's help, they can work harder and better, until the day when Latin America becomes a worthy place for all its citizens without class, race or gender distinctions" (The Third Millennium as a Pastoral Challenge, o.c. p. 112).

In the first place we must convince ourselves that the visible image of the Church is the face of the invisible God. It is the most significant sign of the Incarnation: Jesus is the human face of God. The Church, as the extension of Christ, symbolises the human reality of the face of God in the world. The human and the divine aspects of the Church are the factors which transform Her into a sacrament of salvation and total liberation. From this emerges the ecclesiology of communion as a visible sign and a meaningful way of making God present in human history. This is the work - even though it may not be perfect - which believers are performing on an individual, collective, institutional and structural level. Their contribution in culture, values, social and public life entails an ongoing reform. (*Ecclesia semper reformanda*).

In the second place, the growth of pluralism throughout the world compels us to work for a Church where the presence of informed, convinced and firm believers is ever more important. External sociological support will definitely be minimal, and this makes it important for us to rethink spirituality, formation, how to be disciples of Christ, and facilities offered to the masses who somehow feel and say that they are Christians; and to be the leaven through new forms of communities and associations. It is a challenge in a world which is becoming ever more individualistic, where in the midst of the mass trends, one seeks to be attached to a small group which is felt to be closest to one's most intimate and transcendent needs.

The Church is increasingly called to be a community in which brotherhood can be lived in a deep manner. Diversity resulting from different charisms and ministries is subjected to a true equality in the common call to holiness, in the profession of the same faith, in the common dignity and in the common commitment to build the Body of Christ.

Equality does not mean levelling down or abolishing differences, but an attempt to search for unknown ways to promote solidarity, friendship, support, service, mercy and compassion. It amounts to a real "martyrdom" in making ourselves, like St. Paul, Jews with the Jews, slaves with slaves and above all else, servants to all.

Plurality is a characteristic of today's world. Globalization has also brought about the boosting of that which is local and particular. This attitude has a long tradition in the life of the Church and has both its light and dark sides. How can unity be lived in all this diversity? This is a challenge for us living within the Church and in our relations with "other believers" and non believers around us.

In Latin America, the preferential love for the poor and emarginated makes service and brotherly presence a real need. "The work of the Church in favour of the poor in all parts of the Continent is important" - John Paul II tells us; so we must keep working on this line of pastoral action so that it may increasingly become a journey towards our meeting with Christ. He, being rich, made himself poor for us to enrich us with his poverty. We have to intensify and broaden our efforts in this field, with the aim of reaching the largest number of poor people." (n° 58).

## **Conclusion**

Being faithful to the identity of Catholic Action and its renewal in the present context is nothing less than identity with the life and mission of the Church. The proximity of Catholic Action to the hierarchy does not make it a silent servant without a voice, a follower in the negative sense. On the contrary, this sweet yoke of a fuller identification with the most essential work of the Church and with the options of the hierarchy make Catholic Action a travelling companion which helps to look for, discover, start and develop multiple ways of being a Christian in a changing pluralistic world. It is a beautiful specific vocation and a noble mission and work.

In concluding, I should like to remind you of Cardinal Pironio's beautiful prayer: "we, both young and adult men and women, wish to live the Church in the heart of the world, as your Son asks us, deeply involved in the times in which we live. We wish to live with calm, strong and humble faithfulness in union with our pastors - bishops and priests, religious and all the faithful, in the communion of a missionary Church. We feel marked by the fire of the Holy

Spirit and sent again by your Son to announce to all the world the Good News of the Kingdom: the love of the Father".  
This is my wish for all Catholic Action throughout the world.

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***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**