

Dear brothers and sisters,

I greet you with affection, pleased to meet you in the days of your seventeenth National Assembly, and I thank the National President and the General Ecclesiastical Assistant for their words of introduction. I would like to offer you some cues to reflect on the task of a body such as Italian Catholic Action, particularly at a time like the one we are living in. I will follow the three words *action, catholic and Italian*.

## 1. Action

We can ask ourselves what this word "action" means, and above all *whose* action it is. The last chapter of the Gospel of Mark, after recounting the appearance of Jesus to the Apostles and the invitation He addressed to them to go out into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature, ends with this statement: "the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs" 16:20). Whose action is it then? The Gospel assures us that the action belongs to the Lord: it is He who has the exclusive right to act, walking "undercover" in the history we inhabit.

Remembering this does not relieve us of responsibility, but brings us back to our identity as disciples-missionaries. In fact, Mark's account adds immediately afterwards that the disciples "went forth" promptly "and preached everywhere" (ibid.). The Lord acted and they departed. Remembering that the action belongs to the Lord, however, allows us never to lose sight of the fact that it is the Spirit who is the source of the mission: his presence is the cause - and not the effect - of the mission. It enables us always to keep in mind that "our qualification comes from God" (2 Cor 3:5); that history is guided by the Lord's love and we are its co-protagonists. Your programmes too, therefore, aim to rediscover and announce in history the signs of the Lord's goodness.

The pandemic has disrupted many projects, it has asked each of us to deal with the unexpected. Welcoming the unexpected, rather than ignoring or rejecting it, means remaining docile to the Spirit and, above all, faithful to the lives of the men and women of our time.

The evangelist emphasises that Jesus "confirmed the Word with signs". What does this mean? It means that what we do has a precise origin: listening to and welcoming the Gospel. But it also means that there must be a strong link between what we hear and what we live. Living the Word and proclaiming the Word [connected] to life. I invite you, then, to ensure that the search for a synthesis between Word and life, which makes faith an incarnational experience, continues to characterise the formation paths of Catholic Action.

And speaking of the Spirit, who is the one who carries us forward, and speaking of the Lord who acts, who accompanies us, who is with us, we must be very careful not to fall into the illusion of *functionalism*. Programmes, organisation charts are useful, but as a starting point, as an inspiration; what takes the Kingdom of God forward is docility to the Spirit, it is the Spirit, our docility and the presence of the Lord. The freedom of the Gospel. It is sad to see how many organisations have fallen into the trap of organisational charts: everything perfect, all the institutions perfect, all the money needed, everything perfect... But tell me: where is the faith? Where is the Spirit? "No, we are looking for it together, yes, according to the organisational chart we are making". Beware of functionalism. Be careful not to fall into the slavery of organisational charts, of "perfect" things... The Gospel is disorder because the Spirit, when it arrives, makes so much noise that the action of the Apostles seems to be the action of drunks; so they said: " They have had too much new wine"(cf. Acts 2:13). Docility to the Spirit is revolutionary, because Jesus Christ is revolutionary, because the Incarnation is revolutionary, because the Resurrection is revolutionary. Your sending must also have this revolutionary characteristic.

What characteristics must the action have, the work of Catholic Action have? I would say first of all *gratuitousness*. The missionary thrust is not placed in the logic of conquest but in that of gift. *Gratuity*, the mature fruit of the gift of self, asks you to devote yourselves to your local communities, assuming the responsibility of proclamation; it asks you to listen to your territories, listening to their needs, interweaving fraternal relationships. Your history is made up of many "saints next door" - so many! - and it is a history that must continue: holiness is an inheritance to be preserved and a vocation to be welcomed.

A second characteristic of your actions that I would like to emphasise is *humility* and *meekness*. The Church is grateful to the Association to which you belong, because your presence often makes no noise - let the Spirit make the noise, you make no noise - but it is a faithful, generous, responsible presence. Humility and meekness are the keys to live the service, not to occupy space but to initiate processes. I am happy because in these years you have taken seriously the path indicated by *Evangelii gaudium*. Continue along this road: there is a long way to go! This referred to action.

## 2. Catholic - second word.

The word "catholic", which qualifies your identity, says that the mission of the Church has no boundaries. Jesus called his disciples to an experience of a strong sharing of life with Him, but he reached them where they lived and worked. And he called them as they were. You too are asked to become increasingly aware that being "with all and for all" (cf. (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 273) does not mean "diluting" the mission, "watering it down", but keeping it closely linked to concrete life, to the people you live with.

The word "catholic" can therefore be translated as "making oneself close", because it is universal, "making oneself close", but to everyone. The time of the pandemic, which has demanded and still demands that we accept forms of distancing, has made the value of fraternal closeness even more evident: among people, among generations, among territories. Being an association is precisely a way of expressing this desire to live and believe together. By being an association, today you testify that distance can never become indifference, can never become estrangement. There is the

bad distance, that of looking the other way, indifference, coldness: I have mine, I don't need..., I go on.

You can do a lot in this field, precisely because you are an association of lay people. The danger is the clericalization of Catholic Action, but we'll talk about that another time, because it will take too long... It is an everyday temptation. There is still a widespread temptation to think that the promotion of the laity -facing so many ecclesial needs - passes through a greater involvement of the laity in "things of the priests", in clericalization. With the risk that we end up clericalising the laity. But you, in order to be valued, do not need to become something other than what you are through Baptism. Your secularity is richness for the catholicity of the Church, which wants to be leaven, "salt of the earth and light of the world".

In particular, you lay people of Catholic Action can help the whole Church and society to rethink together what kind of humanity we want to be, what kind of earth we want to inhabit, what kind of world we want to build. You too are called to make an original contribution to the creation of a new "integral ecology": with your skills, your passion, your responsibility.

The great human and social suffering generated by the pandemic risks to become an educational catastrophe and an economic emergency. Let us cultivate a wise attitude, as did Jesus, who learned obedience from what he suffered" (Heb 5:8). We must also wonder: what can we learn from this time and this suffering? He "learned obedience", says the Letter to the Hebrews, that is, he learned a high and demanding form of listening, capable of permeating action. Listening to this time is an exercise in fidelity that we cannot shirk. I entrust to you above all those most affected by the pandemic and those who risk paying the highest price: the children, the young, the elderly, those who have experienced fragility and loneliness.

And let us not forget that your associative experience is "catholic" because it involves children, young people, adults, the elderly, students, workers: an experience of a people. Catholicity is precisely the experience of the holy faithful people of God: never lose the popular character! In this sense, to be the people of God.

### 3. Third word: Italian

The third word is "Italian". Your Association has always been embedded in Italian history and helps the Church in Italy to be a generator of hope for your whole country. You can help the ecclesial community to be a leaven of dialogue in society, in the style I indicated at the Florence Conference. And the Italian Church will take up the Florence Conference again in the Assembly [of Bishops] in May, to remove it from the temptation of archiving it, and it will do so in the light of the synodal path that the Italian Church will begin, which we do not know how it will end and we do not know the things that will come out of it. The synodal journey, which will begin with every Christian community, from the bottom up to the top. And the light, from the top to the bottom, will be the Florence Conference.

A Church of dialogue is a synodal Church, listening at the same time to the Spirit and to the voice of God that reaches us through the cry of the poor and the earth. Indeed, synodal is not so much a

plan to be planned and implemented, but first and foremost a style to be incarnated. And we must be precise when we speak of synodality, of synodal journey, of synodal experience. Synodality is not a parliament, synodality is not being a parliament. Synodality is not only the discussion of problems, of different things that there are in society.... It is beyond that. Synodality is not looking for a majority, for an agreement on the pastoral solutions that we have to do. This alone is not synodality; this is a nice 'Catholic parliament', all right, but it is not synodality. Because the Spirit is missing. What makes the discussion, the "parliament", the search for things become synodality is the presence of the Spirit: prayer, silence, discernment of all we share. There can be no synodality without the Spirit, and there is no Spirit without prayer. This is very important.

The Church of dialogue is a synodal Church, listening together to the Spirit and to the voice of God that reaches us through the cry of the poor and the earth. Generally speaking, sinners are also the poor of the earth. In fact, the synod is not so much a plan to be planned and implemented, a pastoral decision to be taken, but first and foremost a style to be incarnated.

In this sense, your Association is a "gymnasium" of synodality, and your attitude has been and can continue to be an important resource for the Italian Church, which is questioning itself on how to develop this style at all levels. Dialogue, discussion, research, but with the Holy Spirit.

Your most valuable contribution will once again come from your laity, which is an antidote to self-referentiality. It is curious: when one does not live true laity in the Church, one falls into self-referentiality. Making a synod is not looking in the mirror, nor is it looking at the diocese or the bishops' conference, no, it is not that. It is walking together following the Lord and towards the people, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Laity is also an antidote to abstractness: a synodal path must lead to choices. And these choices, if they are to be practicable, must start from reality, not from the three or four ideas that are fashionable or that have come up in the discussion. Not to leave reality as it is, obviously not, but to try to influence it, to make it grow in the line of the Holy Spirit, to transform it according to the project of the Kingdom of God.

Brothers and sisters, I wish your Assembly every success. May it help to bring to maturity the awareness that, in the Church, the voice of the laity must not be heard "by concession", no. Sometimes the voice of priests, or of bishops, must be heard, and at times "by concession"; always it must be "by right". But also that of the laity 'by right', not 'by concession'. Both. It must be heard out of conviction, out of right, because all God's people are "infallible *in credendo*". And I heartily bless you and all your territorial associations. And please do not forget to pray for me, because this work is by no means easy! Thank you.