



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE CONGRESS OF THE INTERNATIONAL
FORUM OF CATHOLIC ACTION (IFCA)**

*Synod Hall
Thursday, 27 April 2017*

[Multimedia]

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I greet all of you on the occasion of this International Congress of Catholic Action, which has taken as its theme: “Catholic Action is Mission. With All and For All”. I would like to share with you some concerns and considerations.

Charism – rebirth in the light of [Evangelii Gaudium](#)

Historically, the mission of Catholic Action has been to form lay people to assume their specific responsibility in the world. Today, in effect, it is the formation of missionary disciples. I thank you for having decisively taken [Evangelii Gaudium](#) as your magna carta.

Catholic Action’s charism is the charism of the Church herself, profoundly incarnate in the here and now of every diocesan Church, as she attentively contemplates and discerns the life of her people and seeks new ways to evangelize and carry out her mission, beginning with the different parish situations.

Traditionally, Catholic Action has had four pillars or feet on which it moves: *Prayer, Formation, Sacrifice and Apostolate*. At different periods in its history, it has put one of these feet first and let the others follow. Thus, at a certain time, the stress was on prayer or formation in doctrine. Given the needs of the present time, the apostolate should be the distinctive feature and it should move first. Not to the detriment of the other realities, but on the contrary, to enable them to move forward

too. The missionary apostolate calls for prayer, formation and sacrifice. This was clearly emphasized at Aparecida and in *Evangelii Gaudium*. In mission, there is always a movement towards integration.

Form: by offering a process of growth in faith, an ongoing mission-oriented catechetical programme adapted to every situation, based on the Word of God, with the aim of fostering a joyful friendship with Jesus and an experience of fraternal love.

Pray: with that holy “extroversion” that opens your hearts to other people’s needs, their sufferings and their joys – a prayer that makes you go forth and takes you far. In this way, you will avoid constant self-concern.

Sacrifice: not simply to feel more pure – a generous sacrifice is one that benefits others. Offer your time in trying to help others grow; offer what you have in your pockets and share it with those who have less; offer the gift of your personal vocation generously to embellish our common home and help it to grow.

A renewal of your commitment to evangelize – in the diocese and in the parish

For Catholic Action, mission is not one task among others: it is *the* task. The charism of Catholic Action is to advance the Church’s pastoral activity. Unless mission is its distinctive strength, Catholic Action will lose its true nature and its reason for existing.

It is essential to renew and modernize the commitment of Catholic Action to evangelization. The aim must be to reach everyone, everywhere, on all occasions, and in every existential periphery, in reality and not just in principle.

This means rethinking your formation programmes, your forms of apostolate and even your prayer life, so that these will be, essentially and not occasionally, missionary. Abandon the old principle that says, “We have always done it this way”. Some of those things were very good and praiseworthy, but they would be out of place were we to do them again today.

Catholic Action must take up the overall mission of the Church, with a sense of generous membership in the diocesan Church, starting with the parish.

The mission of the universal Church is renewed in each particular Church in its own particular way. So too, Catholic Action takes on true vigour by responding to, and making its own, the pastoral outreach of each diocesan Church, through concrete forms of participation that start from the parishes.

Catholic Action must provide the diocesan Church with a mature laity that readily supports pastoral

projects everywhere as a way of realizing its vocation. You need to be incarnate in concrete ways.

Nor can you be like those groups that are so universal that they are not based anywhere, answer to no one, and are always on the lookout for what they suits them wherever they go.

Agents – everyone, without exception

All Catholic Action members are missionaries in action. Children evangelize children, young people other young people, adults other adults, and so on. No one shows the joy of the life of faith more effectively than a peer.

Avoid falling into the temptation of “perfectionism”, endlessly preparing for the mission with interminable analyses that, once finished, are already obsolete. Jesus, with his apostles, gives us the best example: he sent them out with what they had. Then he met with them and helped them to discern what they had experienced.

Let reality dictate times and places, and let the Holy Spirit guide you. He is the inner teacher who illumines our work once we are free of preconceptions and conditionings. We learn how to evangelize by evangelizing, just as we learn how to pray by praying, provided we have a good disposition.

All of you can go out on mission, even if not everyone can go into the streets or the countryside. It is important to give a special place to the elderly who have been members for a long time or have recently joined. They could well be the contemplative and intercessory section within the various sections of Catholic Action. They can build up a store of prayer and grace for the mission. This is true of the sick as well. God listens to their prayer with special affection. May all of them feel that they have a part to play, and realize that they can be active and useful.

Recipients – all people and every periphery

It is important that Catholic Action be present in political, business and professional life, not to present ourselves as perfect Christians, but in order to be of greater service.

It is essential that Catholic Action be present in prisons and hospitals, in the streets, in slums, in factories. Otherwise, it will be an elitist institution with nothing to say to anyone, including the Church herself.

I desire a Catholic Action present among people: in the parish, in the diocese, in towns and in neighbourhoods, in the family, in offices and workplaces, in the countryside, in all spheres of life. These are the new areopagi where decisions are made and culture is created.

Streamline your admission process. Do not be customs houses. You cannot be more restrictive than the Church herself or more papist than the Pope. Open your doors and do not impose tests of Christian perfection, for that way you will be encouraging a hypocritical pharisaism. What is needed is active mercy.

The commitment made by lay people who join Catholic Action is forward-looking. It is the decision to work for the building of the Kingdom. We do not need to “bureaucratize” this particular grace, because the Lord’s call comes when we least expect it. Nor can we “sacramentalize” an official status by making demands that pertain to another sphere of the life of faith and not to the commitment to evangelize. Everyone has a right to be an evangelizer.

May Catholic Action offer a welcoming space and a Christian experience to those, who for personal reasons, may feel that they are “second-class Christians”.

Method – in the midst of people

The method to be used depends on the recipients. As the Council tells us, and we often pray at Mass, we are to be conscious of and sharers in people’s struggles and hopes, in order to show them the way of salvation. Catholic Action cannot stand apart from people; it comes from the people and needs to remain with the people. You have to make Catholic Action more “popular”, that is, people-oriented. This is not a matter of image, but of authenticity and charism. Nor is it demagoguery; it is to follow in the footsteps of the Master, who never found anything repugnant.

Following this path means being “immersed” in people, sharing their lives and coming to know their interests and their desires, their deepest longings and their hurts, but also what it is they need from us. This is fundamental, in order to avoid wasting time answering questions that nobody asks. We can sit at our desks and think of ways of evangelizing, but only after we have been with people and not the other way round.

A more “popular” and incarnate Catholic Action will create problems for you, since people who do not appear suited to join will want to do so: families where the parents are not married in Church, men and women with a difficult past or present yet continue to struggle, young people who are confused and hurt. It is a challenge for Catholic Action’s ecclesial maternity: to accept everyone and to accompany them on their life’s journey with the crosses they bear.

Everyone can be a part, starting with what they have and what they can do.

This is the concrete people that you are to form. With this concrete people, and for this concrete people, you are to pray.

Focus your vision in order to see the signs of God evident in different situations, especially in

expressions of popular devotion. From these you can better understand people's hearts and discover the surprising ways that God acts, in a way that surpasses our thoughts and ideas.

The Plan – an outgoing Catholic Action – passion for Christ, passion for our people

You have proposed a Catholic Action that goes forth. This is good because it keeps you properly balanced. Going forth means openness, generosity, meeting reality outside the four walls of organizations and parishes. This means giving up trying to exercise undue control and to programme results. That freedom is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, and it will help you to grow.

Catholic Action's plan of evangelization should follow these steps: take initiative, get involved, accompany, bear fruit and celebrate. Move forward a step at a time, become a part of things and advance together. This is already something to celebrate. Pass on the joy of your faith, the joy you feel when evangelizing, in season and out of season.

Do not fall into the temptation of "structuralism". Be enterprising. You are no longer faithful to the Church if at every step you wait to be told what to do.

Encourage your members to value chance, face-to-face missionary encounters, or those starting from the missionary activity of the community.

Do not clericalize the laity. Your members' aspiration should not be to form part of the "Sanhedrin" that gathers around the parish priest, but to work passionately for the Kingdom. At the same time, do not neglect to encourage vocations with all seriousness. Be a school of holiness, which basically involves discovering your proper vocation, which is not to be an office manager or a priest-diplomat, but instead, and above all, an evangelizer.

You should be a place of encounter for other institutional charisms and movements present in the Church, without any fear of losing your identity. From your members should come evangelizers, catechists, missionaries and social workers who help make the Church grow.

It is frequently said that Catholic Action is the long arm of the hierarchy. Far from being a prerogative that leads you to look down on others, it is an immense responsibility. It demands fidelity and consistency to what the Church points us to at every period of her history, without remaining anchored to past forms as if they were the only ones possible. Fidelity to your mission entails the flexibility that marks those who have one ear attuned to the people and the other to God.

In the 1937 publication *"La Acción Católica a luz de la teología Tomista"*, we read the following words: "Might *Catholic Action* not be translated as *Catholic Passion*?" Catholic passion, the passion of the Church, is to experience the delightful and comforting joy of evangelising. This is

what we need from Catholic Action. Thank you.

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