



SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE **BOLLETTINO**

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Audience with the young people of Italian Catholic Action

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the young people of Italian Catholic Action, on the occasion of the exchange of Christmas wishes.

The following is the address delivered by the Pope during the audience:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, dear young people, good morning!

Thank you for coming again this year to exchange Christmas wishes! I greet the National President and the General Assistant, the leaders, the educators; I greet all of you!

You have chosen as a guide for this year's formative journey the theme: "*Put out to sea*". This immediately makes us think of Jesus' first disciples, who were fishermen; and Jesus made them become "fishers of men" (Lk 5:1-11). So, I would like to reflect a moment with you on these two images: *fishing* and *wonder*.

First: *fishing*, being *fishers of men*. What does it mean? Perhaps "capturing" people, maybe using more modern nets? This is certainly not what the Lord wants. God does not want to "capture" anyone, because He respects our freedom. Instead, He offers everyone His love and His salvation, without expecting anything in return and without exclusions. He shares with us His joy of being the beloved Son of the Father: "You know?", Jesus says to us, "I have a wonderful Father, who loves everyone, without limits, and I want to introduce Him to you too, so you will be happy with me!".

This is how Jesus is a "fisher of men": spreading the joy and wonder of His love to them.

And this leads us to the second point: *wonder*, being able to be in awe. Have you seen boring people? Yes?

They exist. And do you know why? Because they do not know how to feel wonder! Everything is all the same, monotonous: they have lost the capacity for wonder. Christmas is a truly special moment in this sense: the streets are filled with lights, we exchange gifts, the liturgy is enriched with songs and beautiful sounds. The children and young people of Catholic Action come here and, one, two, three, they sing... It is all beautiful. Think of the Nativity display: how much wonder there is! The shepherds, the Magi and the other characters surround the grotto with their astonished faces, involving even the animals and the entire landscape as if in a great feast. Stop in front of a Nativity display and look closely; then go to another and look closely... In all of them there is variety. The Neapolitan Nativities are beautiful! But Jesus, Our Lady and Saint Joseph are never missing from any of them: that Love God sent to us, and Our Lady and Joseph who raise Him.

Be attentive, though, because this applies not only at Christmas. All our life, in fact, is an extraordinary gift: each one of us is unique, and every day is special, as Blessed Carlo Acutis loved to say. You know him, don't you? Do you know that he will be a saint soon? Good! He used to say: we must be "originals", not "photocopies"! And how many people are unable to be original. They are photocopies! Today we do this because the newspaper says it must be done, or out of habit. And Christmas, for many people, is a "photocopy" of many things and not the encounter, which is so beautiful, that every year brings us newness, newness in the soul and in the heart of each one of us. Look at the Nativity display, look at Our Lady, Joseph and the Infant, the Magi, the shepherds, humble people, who go to see Jesus.

Let us learn, then, to experience wonder. Please do not lose the capacity for wonder. Let us learn to take nothing for granted, especially love: that of God and that of the people we meet. Let us spread our wonder to everything and everyone: from home to home, parish to parish, city to city, nation to nation. In this way, we spread happiness, trust and consolation. Christmas is good news. It is not about having a banquet and nothing more. One has dinner, it is nice, with the family... But there are also other things: one looks at the Nativity display, one goes to church. It is a festivity that is at the root of our faith.

I know you have brought gifts for those most in need. Do not forget those in need! And when you find children in need, people in need, look them in the eye and touch their hand while you give alms, close to them, with that closeness that only love gives. And Mary and Jesus were in need. Who among you goes to give birth where Jesus was born? They go to the clinic, or home... Jesus was born there, in a stable. They were poor, they were needy. Do not forget children in need, go in search of them! And give your love, your company, and help them. I like this, that you have brought gifts to give to the poor. And I encourage you always to be close, in prayer and in charity, to those who suffer, to the many young people like you who suffer due to hunger, war, sickness. Speaking of war, some children from Ukraine are coming here: they are bringing them to take them away from that terrible war. Do you know that Ukrainian children, who have experienced the war, have forgotten how to smile? They do not know how to smile. Think of those children, those young people. In this way, you will echo the song of the Angels: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom His favour rests" (*Lk* 2:14).

Dear friends, I bless you, and with you all the children and young people of Catholic Action. And please, do not forget to pray for me. God bless you!
