

ROLE OF CATHOLIC ACTION IN MODERN SOCIETY

To you, distinguished members of the National Presidency of the Italian Catholic Action;

To you, beloved laymen and priests, respectively diocesan Presidents and Assistants, who have come from all over Italy for the usual National Meeting;

To you our greetings and our thanks for the joy you give us with your visit.

Today's meeting offers us the possibility of testifying again to the whole large family of Italian Catholic Action the trust we put in it, the hope it arouses in our heart, the reliance we place on its availability and collaboration in order to bring about the Christian animation of the modern world. This is the task that Vatican II entrusted to the Catholic laity (*Lumen Gentium*, 31; *Apostolican Actuositatem*, 7); and this forms the enthusiasm of your hearts, the purpose of your activity, the secret nucleus of your programmes. The subject of your meeting assures us this is so, closely bound up as it is with what will form the framework of the catechetical network for your next year of activity: "the Christian and commitment in the world". You have, in fact, considered in the first place the role of Italian Catholic Action for the religious animation of Italian society. And in this light, we are sure, you will have confronted, clearly and objectively, also the other subject, that is the associative and organizational situation of the institution, a year after the expiry of the three-year period of experimentation of the new Statute.

CONTINUITY OF IDEAL

We wish to congratulate you heartily — and particularly the planners and speakers of the meeting — on this renewed at-

¹L'Osservatore Romano, May 25, 1972.

testation of awareness of the mission that Catholic Action has in society, as the organization of laymen who wish to live with complete consistency the threefold mission, priestly, prophetic, and royal, that the pastoral theology of Vatican II assigned to them. Doing so, you show that you are still in the line of absolute continuity with the ideals and purposes by which Italian Catholic Action has been inspired in its history, now over a hundred years old.

Actually, this programme of Christian animation has been its driving force right from the beginning; so that your presence today and the motive that justifies it, offer us happy opportunity to praise the history of Italian Catholic Action publicly. It seems to us right to do so, and it is. In fact, this magnificent work, in the various branches into which it is divided, with its commitment of collaboration with the Holy See and with the Episcopate, with its clear-sightedness, with the firmness it has shown at difficult moments, has always offered a precious, irreplaceable help for the operative presence of the Church in the various sectors of Italian life—at the level of parishes, dioceses, works of charity, social and civic initiatives, etc. In this way it continues efficaciously that “coordination with the Apostolic Hierarchy, which is still alive as at the times of the Apostles, because there is still the apostolate continuing in the Episcopate”, as our Predecessor Pius XI opportunely stressed (Address on 3 November 1929 to Student Delegates and Aspirants; cf. *L'Osservatore Romano*, 4-5 November 1929).

“PRAYER, ACTION, SACRIFICE”

Praise, therefore, for the history of Catholic Action; and this is what we consider opportune today to recall before you, and, through you, to the whole Italian ecclesial community. Praise, of the persons, in the first place, who left an admirable testimony of love for Christ and for the Church, of upright lives of faith, piety and unsparing effort; who lived, in a word, in conviction and example, the great and unforgotten motto: “Prayer, action, sacrifice”. We mention the names of Giovanni B. Casoni, a Bolognese lawyer, the pioneer of a national Catholic association in Italy; Conte Mario Fani and Giovanni Acquaderni, who, after a eucharistic vigil in the Church of St. Rose in Viterbo, founded, as everyone knows, the first “Society of Italian Catholic Youth”; and then, one after the other, those of Piero Panighi for the Men, Igino Righette for University

graduates, Armida Barelli for Girls, Marchesa Giustiniani Bandini for Catholic Action Women; Toniolo, Medolago Albani, Dalla Torre, Pericoli, Corsanego, etc. Alongside them, hidden and strong inspirers of great decisions and persevering resolutions, there are the ecclesiastics who gave so much to the formation and maturity of your ranks: Mons. Radini Tedeschi, Mons. Olgiati, Mons. Pini, Fr. Gemelli, Mons. Cavagna and Sargolini and Fr. Ceresana, and so many, so very many humble and great priests, who thoroughly understood their times, and gave themselves unstintingly, according to the charism received in ordination, to be teachers and guides. Who does not have some personal memory of those who shone with special virtues, to such an extent that they could be indicated as examples sweeping people along to the heroism of Christian life?

But alongside those who stood out because of their particular mission and tasks, we must keep in mind the thousands and thousands of faithful members who, formed in the school of Catholic Action, made up connecting tissue of the Italian ecclesial community.

But Catholic Action deserves praise, not only for the persons, but also for its formula, which has proved its worth for over a hundred years. Right from the beginning, in fact, it promoted the work of the laity in various sectors of the Church, in advance of the times, and prepared the way for the magnificent development that Vatican II brought about in this field of lay activity, relying fully on laymen in all sectors of secular life, where they are called to bear witness, "in the manner of leaven" (*Lumen Gentium*, 31).

Italian Catholic Action has done a great deal in this direction. In the first place, it gave the directives and encouraged study of an ecclesiology, in which laymen understood the place they must assume in the Church; and this is done particularly by means of a real spiritual formation, based on eucharistic piety and conscious participation in the Liturgy—do you remember the dialogue Masses, the first step to today's liturgical reform?—on Marian devotion, meditation, spiritual retreats, and all the classical forms intended to nourish inner life.

Catholic Action, furthermore, fostered, with its formula, the animation of the Italian ecclesial community, arousing in its various branches—from children to teen-agers, young people and adults, in the various specializations characteristic of

mentality and profession or work—keen awareness of their responsibilities the duty to engage in the apostolate, collaboration with parish works, multiform social activity and missionary outlook. This duty is incumbent on everyone as a result of baptism and confirmation, sacraments which dispose the whole person for Christ's service.

TESTIMONY TO THE GOSPEL

And just for this reason, Catholic Action, finally, has prepared all these groups for the apostolate in the modern world. It has confronted them with the ever increasing demands that the Christian vocation imposes: that is, to bear witness to the Gospel, to penetrate the people like yeast in dough and infuse the sweet perfume of Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 2,15); to take to heart the worries, anguish and questions of their contemporaries, live their experiences, become united and friendly with them, become all things to all men (cf. 1 Cor. 9, 22), to win them all for Christ.

We admit that some people, at some moments, and even at present, may have doubted the validity of this formula; yet its results in the past prove its efficacy, and show that, if duly adapted to the necessities of today, it is still entirely suitable to sustain the Lay apostolate, desired by Vatican II. You are aware of this. This is attested by the praiseworthy initiatives about which you have informed us, especially a new campaign among children, the renewal of the apostolate among the young, of those collaboration with the clergy, an extensive network of catechetical action, etc.

We thank you for your goodwill; and we encourage you to continue along this way, without losing heart at the difficulties and lack of understanding. Christ is with you. The Blessed Virgin supports your efforts. Have faith! And Catholic Action will continue, through you, and with the generous collaboration of all its forces, to carry out its magnificent mission.

This is the wish the Pope makes for you. He prays for you every day, and blesses you all with the deepest affection.