



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PARTICIPANTS
IN THE EXTRAORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY
OF ITALIAN CATHOLIC ACTION (ACI)**

Dear Participants in the Extraordinary Assembly of Italian Catholic Action, 1. I am pleased to greet you all with joy and affection, dear brothers and sisters who have gathered in Rome for your Extraordinary Assembly on the theme: "*History becomes prophecy*". I address a cordial greeting in particular to your General Chaplain, Bishop Francesco Lambiasi, and to your National President, Dr Paola Bignardi. The specific goal of the work that awaits you in the coming days is the most important task of revising the *Statutes* of the highly-esteemed Catholic Action, to bring them in line with the changing needs of the times and the apostolic perspectives of the new millennium. In recent years, your association has observed the norms and guidelines contained in the 1969 Statutes, which captured the spirit and decisions of the Second Vatican Council. They have helped you to discover better and better, in living it as "as lay persons", the greatness of the Christian vocation and apostolic commitment in an ecclesial and cultural context that is very different from that of previous years. Updating the Statutes means telling yourselves, the Christian community and civil society today what the features of an Association like yours should be to meet the needs of the mission of the Church and of the evangelization of the world. The new Statutes will express your spirit, the lofty goals you set for yourselves and the approaches that define your mature ecclesial experience and give them an unmistakable quality as well as a unique place in the panorama of lay associations. 2. Your long history originated from a *charism*: a special gift of the Spirit of the Risen One who never lets his Church lack the talents and resources of grace that the faithful need in order to serve the cause of the Gospel. Reflect upon the charism of Catholic Action, dear friends, with humble pride and deep joy! It has inspired many young people, such as Mario Fani and Giovanni Acquaderni who founded it more than 130 years ago. This charism also guided and accompanied the journey of holiness of Pier Giorgio Frassati, Gianna Beretta-Molla, Luigi and Maria Beltrame-Quattrocchi, and a multitude of other lay people who lived in heroic fidelity to their baptismal promises with an extraordinary normality. The Pontiffs and Pastors who recognized your charism over the decades, blessed and supported your Association until they accepted it - like the Italian Bishops' Conference (CEI) - as an association especially chosen and promoted by the ecclesiastical authority to link it more closely to its apostolic office (cf. *Nota Pastorale della CEI*, 22 May 1981, n. 25). 3. This charism has been more fully described in the conciliar Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (n. 20): you are lay Christians expert in the splendid adventure of *making the Gospel and life converge*, showing how well the "Good News" responds to the searching questions in each person's heart and is the highest and truest light that can guide society in building the "civilization of love". As lay persons you have chosen *to live for the Church* and for the globality of her mission, "dedicated", as your Bishops wrote, "with a direct, organic connection,

to the diocesan community", so as to enable everyone to rediscover the value of a faith lived in communion and to make every Christian community a family that cares for all its children (cf. *Lettera del Consiglio Episcopale Permanente della CEI*, 12 March 2002, n. 4). As lay persons you have chosen to follow *in the form of an Association* the Gospel ideal of holiness in the particular Church, so as to cooperate as a unit, "an organic body", in the evangelizing mission of each ecclesial community. As lay persons you have chosen to form an Association whose special connection with the Pastors respects and promotes the *constitutive secular character* of its members. The spirit of that "syntax of communion", which is a characteristic of the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, and the rules of democratic participation in group life, help you express to the full the unity of the entire ecclesial Body of Christ and the variety of charisms and vocations, with full respect for the dignity and responsibility of every member of the People of God. The organic synthesis of these goals - *missionary, diocesan, unitary and secular* - is the most mature and ecclesially-integrated form of the lay apostolate. By renewing your Statutes, you intend to reassert the value of these features today and to specify how they should be interpreted, so as to continue to touch the hearts of the many communities and lay persons who will be able to model their life on this ideal.

4. "The Church cannot do without Catholic Action": this is what I told you last year, during your 11th Assembly. I repeat it to you at the end of a particularly busy year, devoted to the renewal of ACI. The Church needs you, she needs lay people who have found in Catholic Action a *school of holiness* in which they have learned to live the radicalness of the Gospel in ordinary daily life. The Blesseds who have emerged from your ranks, and the Venerables such as Alberto Marvelli, Pina Suriano and Fr Antonio Seghezzi, impel you to continue to make your Association a place where its members grow as disciples of the Lord, at the school of the Word and at the table of the Eucharist; a training ground where they can practise love and forgiveness, learn how to conquer evil with good and, with patient tenacity, weave a network of brotherhood that embraces everyone, especially the poorest. Dear young people and adults of Catholic Action, your Association will be renewed if each one of its members rediscovers the promises of Baptism, choosing Christian holiness with full consciousness and availability as "the high standard of ordinary Christian living" in daily life (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 31). For this, we must let ourselves be moulded by the liturgy of the Church, cultivate the art of meditation and the interior life, and make an annual spiritual retreat. Dear friends, ensure that every one of your groups is a true school of prayer, and that each member has access to help in discernment and in fidelity to his vocation.

5. The Church needs you, because you have chosen service to the particular Church and her mission as the scope of your apostolic commitment; because you have made the parish the place where, day after day, you express faithful and enthusiastic dedication. In this way you continue to fan the missionary spirit of those men and women of Catholic Action who humbly and unobtrusively help make the Christian communities come alive in various parts of the country. I urge you to devote all your energies to the service of communion in close unity with the Bishop, collaborating with him and with the presbyterate in the "ministry of synthesis", so as to weave a strong, tighter fabric of cordial communion, which is intensely human precisely because it is genuinely Christian. Help your parish rediscover its zeal for Gospel proclamation, and foster the pastoral solicitude that goes in search of everyone to help each to experience the joy of the encounter with the Lord. And through your presence, may every community shine in the neighbourhoods of your cities and villages as a living sign of the presence of Jesus, the Son of God who came to dwell among us!

6. The Church needs you, because Catholic Action is *an open and welcoming environment* in which anyone can express his availability for service, finding useful opportunities for formative dialogue in a congenial atmosphere that encourages generous decisions. There are witnesses and teachers in your Associations who are prepared to accompany their brothers and sisters on their way to a convinced and mature faith, capable of witnessing in the world. I recommend that you emphasize a solid formation, adapted to the demands of the new evangelization. Always care for every person and help everyone to defend the treasure of faith, sowing it in every walk of life. May Catholic Action be once again for a growing number of

people and communities the great school of lay spirituality and of the apostolate of movements and associations!7. The Church needs you, because you never stop *looking at the world with God's eyes*; hence, you succeed in interpreting this time of ours and in making out in it the signs of the Spirit's presence. You have in your tradition the magnificent witnesses of lay people whose contributions were crucial to the growth of the human city. Continue to make available to towns and villages, in workplaces and schools, in health-care and recreation centres, in culture, economics and politics, your skills and credibility, which can contribute to making our contemporary world the great work site of the civilization of love. May Catholic Action help the ecclesial community not to fall into the trap of disregarding the problems of life and families, of peace and justice, and may it witness to trust in the renewing and transforming power of Christianity. Thus, it will have an incisive effect on civil society, for the construction of the common home under the flag of the dignity and vocation of men and women, according to the Italian Church's "Cultural Project".8. Dear members of Catholic Action, as I encourage you to explore ever more deeply the riches of your charism, I urge the diocesan and parish communities to carefully reappraise the Association as a place for the growth of lay vocations as well as an apprenticeship in which people learn to express them with ever greater confidence. "History becomes prophecy": you have chosen this theme for your Assembly. I hope that you will reinterpret with wise discernment your own impressive background, distinguishing what is the fruit of time from what is a gift of the Spirit, which bears the seeds of a new future that has already started. I am sure that this Extraordinary Assembly will reveal the mature and serene face of the lay people involved, and I am deeply confident that you will adopt firm, clear options to make Catholic Action an Association that is equal to the mission entrusted to it. May Mary, Mother of the Church, sustain you in your mission. To her, venerated in the Holy House of Loreto where you plan to go on pilgrimage next year, I entrust each one of you, your families and all your projects. With these sentiments I cordially impart to you all my Apostolic Blessing. *From Castel Gandolfo, 8 September 2003*

PAUL II