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Audience with Italian Catholic Action

This morning, the Third Sunday of Easter, the Pope received in audience in St. Peter's Square the members of Italian Catholic Action, on the occasion of the celebration of the 150th anniversary of its founding.

After a few moments of prayer, music and testimonies, at 10.50 the Holy Father entered the square, which he toured by popemobile. Then, introduced by the president of Italian Catholic Action, Matteo Truffelli, and the general ecclesiastical assistant, His Excellency Msgr. Gualtiero Sigismondi, the Pope gave the following address:

Holy Father's address

Dear friends of Catholic Action, good morning!

I am truly happy to meet so many of you today, celebrating the 150th anniversary of the founding of your Association. I greet you all with affection, starting with the general assistant and the national president, whom I thank for the words with which they have introduced this meeting. The birth of Italian Catholic Action was a dream, born of the heart of two young people, Mario Fani and Giovanni Acquaderni, and which became over time a path of faith for many generations, a vocation to holiness for very many people: children, young people and adults who became disciples of Jesus and, for this reason, endeavoured to live as joyful witnesses of His love in the world. For me too there is something of the atmosphere of the family: my father and my grandmother were members of Catholic Action!

It has a beautiful and important history, for which you have many reasons to be grateful to the Lord and for which the Church is thankful. It is the story of a people formed of men and women of every age and condition, who have made a decision based on the desire to live together the encounter with the Lord: young and old, laypeople and pastors, together, independently of social position, of cultural background, of provenance. Lay faithful who in every time have shared the search for ways by which to announce with their own life the beauty of God's love and to contribute, with their own effort and skill, to the construction of a more just, fraternal and united society. It is a story of passion for the world and for the Church – I remember when I spoke to you about a book written in Argentina in 1937 which said: "Catholic action and Catholic passion!" – and within this story there emerged the

luminous figures of men and women of exemplary faith, who have served the country with generosity and courage.

To have a beautiful history behind you does not serve to make you walk looking to the past, to make you look at yourselves in the mirror, to make yourselves comfortable in your armchairs! Do not forget this: do not walk looking behind you, as you will collide! Do not look at yourselves in the mirror! Many of us are ugly, it is best not to look! And do not make yourselves comfortable in your armchairs, this makes us put on weight and is bad for our cholesterol! Remembering a long path in life helps us to be aware that we are a people who journey while carrying for all, helping each one to grow humanly in faith, sharing the mercy with which the Lord caresses us. I encourage you to continue to be a people of missionary disciples who live and bear witness to the joy of knowing that the Lord loves us with infinite love, and who together with Him deeply love the story we are part of. This is what we are taught by the great witnesses of holiness who traced the history of your association, among whom I would like to recall Giuseppe Toniolo, Armida Barelli, Piergiorgio Frassati, Antonietta Meo, Teresio Olivelli and Vittorio Bachelet. Catholic Action, live up to your history! Live up to these women and these men who have preceded you!

In these one hundred and fifty years, Catholic Action has always been characterized by a great love for Jesus and for the Church. Today too you are called to follow your particular vocation, putting yourselves at the service of the dioceses, around the bishop, always – and in the parishes, always – where the Church abides among the people, always. All the People of God benefit from the fruits of your dedication, experienced in harmony between the universal Church and the particular Church. It is in the typically lay vocation and in a holiness lived in daily life that you can find the strength and the courage to live faith, staying where you are, making welcome and dialogue the style with which you approach others, experiencing the beauty of a shared responsibility. Never tire of walking the streets through which it is possible to nurture the style of an authentic synodality, a way of being the People of God in which everyone can contribute a careful, measured, prayerful interpretation of the signs of the times, to understand and live according to God's will, sure that the action of the Holy Spirit works and renews all things every day.

I invite you to continue your apostolic experience rooted in the parish, which “is not an outdated institution”, do you understand? The parish is not an outdated institution, because it is “the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God's word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration” (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 28). The parish is the space in which people can feel welcome as they are, and can be accompanied in paths of human and spiritual maturation, to grow in faith and love for creation and for their brothers. This is true, however, only if the parish is not wrapped up in itself, and if also the Catholic Action that lives in the parish is not closed up in itself, but rather helps the parish to stay “in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed group made up of the chosen few”. Please, this, no!

Dear members of Catholic Action, may every one of your initiatives, every proposal, every path be a missionary experience, destined towards evangelization, not to self-preservation. May your belonging to the diocese and to the parish be incarnate along the streets of cities, neighbourhoods and towns. As has happened during these hundred and fifty years, feel strongly within you the responsibility of sowing the good seed of the Gospel in the life of the world, through service in charity, political commitment – involve yourselves in politics, but please, in great politics, in Politics with a capital P! – and also through passion for education and participation in cultural exchange. Enlarge your heart to enlarge the heart of your parishes. Be wayfarers of faith, to encounter all, to welcome all, to listen to everyone, to embrace everyone. Every life is a life beloved by the Lord, every face shows us the face of Christ, especially that of the poor, of those who are wounded by life and who feel abandoned, of those who flee death and seek shelter in our homes, in our cities. “None of us can think we are exempt from concern for the poor and for social justice” (*Ibid.*, 201).

Stay open to the situations that surround you. Fearlessly seek dialogue with those who live beside you, even with those who think differently but who like you desire peace, justice, and fraternity. It is in dialogue that we can plan a shared future. It is through dialogue that we build peace, caring for everyone and entering into dialogue with all.

Dear children, young people and adults of Catholic Action: go, reach out to all the peripheries! Go, and there be Church, with the strength of the Holy Spirit.

May the maternal protection of Mary Immaculate sustain you; may the encouragement and esteem of the bishops accompany you; as does my blessing, that I heartily impart to you and your entire Association. And please, do not forget to pray for me!
