



SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE BOLLETTINO

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BIURO PRASOWE STOLICY APOSTOLSKIEJ دار الصحافة التابعة للكرسي الرسولي

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Audience with members of Italian Catholic Action

This morning, in Saint Peter's Square, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the members of Italian Catholic Action, on the occasion of the national meeting on the theme: *With open arms*.

The following is the Pope's address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear friends of Catholic Action, good morning and welcome!

Thank you for your presence. I greet you affectionately, in particular the national president and the general assistant. Just now, passing among you, I met glances full of joy, full of hope. Thank you for this intense and beautiful embrace, that wishes to extend from here to all humanity, especially to those who are suffering. We must never forget people who are suffering.

Indeed, the title you have chosen for your meeting is *With open arms*. The embrace is one of the most spontaneous expressions of human experiences. Human life begins with an embrace, that of parents, the first gesture of welcome, which is followed by many others, which give meaning and value to the days and the years, until the last, when we leave our earthly path. And above all, it is enveloped by the great embrace of God, who loves us, who loves us first and never ceases to hold us close to Him, especially when we return after going astray, as the parable of the merciful Father shows (cf. *Lk 15:1-3,11-32*). What would our life be, and how could the mission of the Church be realized without these embraces? Therefore, I would like to propose to you, as food for thought, three types of embrace: the *embrace that is missing*, the *embrace that saves*, the *embrace that changes life*.

Firstly, the *embrace that is missing*. The zeal you express so festively today is not always well-received in our world: at times it encounters narrow-mindedness, at times it encounters resistance, so the arms stiffen and the hands clench threateningly, becoming not vehicles of fraternity, but of rejection, of opposition, even violent at times, a sign of diffidence towards others, near and far, to the point of conflict. When the embrace transforms

into a fist it is very dangerous. At the origin of wars there are often missing embraces or refused embraces, followed by prejudices, misunderstandings, suspicions, to the point of seeing the other as an enemy. And all this, unfortunately, in these days, is before our eyes in too many parts of the world!

With your presence and your work, you can instead bear witness to everyone that the way of the embrace is the way of life.

Which leads us to the second passage. The first was the missing embrace, now we see the embrace that saves. Already, in human terms, embracing means expressing positive and fundamental values such as affection, respect, trust, encouragement, reconciliation. But it becomes even more vital when it is lived in the dimension of faith. Indeed, at the centre of our existence is the merciful embrace of God who saves, the embrace of the good Father revealed in Christ, and whose face is reflected in every one of His gestures – forgiveness, healing, liberation, service (cf. *Jn* 13:1-15), and whose revelation reaches its culmination in the Eucharist and on the Cross, when Christ offers His life for the salvation of the world, for the good of whoever welcomes Him with a sincere heart, forgiving even His crucifiers (cf. *Lk* 23:24). And all this is shown to us so that we too can learn to do likewise. Therefore, never lose sight of the embrace of the Father who saves, the paradigm of life and heart of the Gospel, model of radicality in love, nurtured and inspired by the free and always superabundant gift of God (cf. *Mt* 5:44-48). Brothers and sisters, may we let ourselves be embraced by Him, like children (cf. *Mt* 18:2-3; *Mk* 10:13-16), may we let ourselves be embraced by Him like children. Each one of us has in their heart something of the child who needs a hug. May we let ourselves be embraced by the Lord. In this way, in the Lord's embrace we leave how to embrace others.

Let us go to the third step: first, the missing embrace; second, the embrace that saves; and third, the *embrace that changes life*. An embrace can change life, show new paths, paths of hope. There are many saints in whose existence an embrace marked a decisive turning point, like Saint Francis, who left everything to follow the Lord after embracing a leper, as he himself recalls in his Testament (cf. *FF* 110: 1407-1408). And if this was valid for them, it applies to us too. For example, for your associative life, which is multiform and finds its common denominator precisely in the embrace of charity (cf. *Col* 3:14; *Rom* 13:10), the one essential mark of Christ's disciples (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 42), the rule, form and end of every means of sanctification and apostolate. Let it shape your every effort and service, so that you may live faithful to your vocation and your history (cf. *Address to Catholic Action*, 30 April 2017).

Friends, you will be all the more a presence of Christ the more you know how to hold and support every brother in need with merciful and compassionate arms, as lay people engaged in the events of the world and history, rich in a great tradition, trained and competent in what concerns your responsibilities, and at the same time humble and fervent in the life of the spirit. In this way you will be able to make concrete signs of change in accordance with the Gospel on the social, cultural, political and economic levels in the contexts in which you operate.

Then, brothers and sisters, the “culture of the embrace”, through your personal and community journeys, will grow in the Church and in society, renewing family and educational relationships, renewing processes of reconciliation and justice, renewing efforts of communion and co-responsibility, and building bonds for a future of peace (cf. *Address to the National Council of Italian Catholic Action*, 30 April 2021).

And in this regard, I would like to add one last thought. Seeing you all here today – children, families, men and women, students, workers, young people, adults and “very grown-ups”, as you call people of my generation – brings to mind the Synod. And I think of the ongoing Synod, which is reaching its third stage, the most demanding and important, the prophetic one. Now it is a matter of translating the work of the preceding phases into choices that give zeal and new life to the Church's mission in our time. But the most important thing about this Synod is *synodality*. The topics, the themes, are to carry forward this expression of the Church, which is *synodality*. For this there is a need for synodal men and women, who know how to engage in dialogue, to interrelate, to search together. There is a need for people forged by the Spirit, for “*pilgrims of hope*”, as the theme of the Jubilee that is now close at hand says, men and women capable of tracing and treading new and challenging paths. I invite you, therefore, to be “athletes and standard-bearers of synodality” (cf. *ibid.*), in the

dioceses and parishes to which you belong, for a full implementation of the journey so far.

In recent months you have experienced, in your communities, moments of intense associative experience, with the renewal of responsibilities at diocesan and parish level, and this evening the eighteenth National Assembly will commence. I hope that you will live this experience, too, not as formal fulfilments, no, but as moments of communion and moments of co-responsibility, ecclesial moments, in which to transmit to one another embraces of affection and fraternal esteem (cf. *Rom 12:10*).

Dear friends, thank you for what you are, thank you for what you do! May Our Lady accompany you always. I pray for you. And please, do not forget to pray for me: for, not against! Thank you.
