



The Holy See

SOLEMNITY OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

**EUCCHARISTIC CELEBRATION
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 10th NATIONAL ASSEMBLY
OF ITALIAN CATHOLIC ACTION**

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Tuesday, 8 December 1998

1. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.... He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him" (*Eph 1:3-4*).

Today's liturgy shows us the dimension of what was "*before the foundation of the world*". Other New Testament texts refer to that "before", including the wonderful Prologue of John's Gospel. Before creation, the eternal Father chose man "in" Christ, his eternal Son. This choice is the fruit of love and expresses love.

Through the eternal Son made Man, the order of *creation* was linked for ever with that of *redemption*, that is, *grace*. This is the meaning of today's solemnity, which, significantly, is celebrated during Advent, the liturgical season in which the Church prepares to commemorate the Messiah's coming at Christmas.

2. "All creation rejoices and even he who holds heaven in his hands takes part in the celebration. Everyone gathers with the same feeling of joy, everyone is filled with the same sense of beauty: the Creator, all creatures, the very Mother of the Creator who enabled him to share in our nature, in our assemblies, in our feasts" (Nicholas Cabasilas, "Homily II on the Annunciation", in *La Madre di Dio*, Abbey of Praglia, 1997, p. 99).

This text by an ancient Eastern author is well suited to today's feast. On our journey to the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, a time of reconciliation and joy, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception marks a step filled with deep meaning for our lives.

As we heard in the Gospel of St Luke, “the divine messenger says to the Virgin: ‘Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!’” (Lk 1:28). The angel’s greeting puts Mary at the very heart of the mystery of Christ, for the Incarnation of the eternal Son, a gift of God for all humanity, is accomplished in her who is “full of grace” (cf. Encyclical Letter, *Redemptoris Mater*, n. 8).

In the coming of God’s Son, all people are blessed; the evil tempter is defeated once and for all and his head is crushed, so that no one can be unhappily associated with that curse recalled a few moments ago in the words of the Book of Genesis (*Gn* 3:14). In Christ, the Apostle Paul writes to the Ephesians, the heavenly Father fills us with every spiritual blessing, chooses us for true holiness, destines us to be his adoptive sons (cf. *Eph* 1:3-5). In him we become a sign of the holiness, love and glory of God on earth.

3. For these reasons *Italian Catholic Action has chosen Immaculate Mary as Queen and special patroness* of their formation courses in missionary involvement. That is why, dear brothers and sisters, you are here today, in the see of Peter, taking part in your 10th National Assembly. One hundred thirty years have past since your foundation, and this year you are commemorating the 30th anniversary of your new statutes, which puts into action the Second Vatican Council’s teaching on the laity and their mission in the Church.

I cordially greet the General Chaplain, Bishop Agostino Superbo, and the National President, Prof. Giuseppe Gervasio, and thank them for their words. I greet my venerable Brothers, Cardinals and Bishops, as well as the many diocesan chaplains attending this celebration. I greet all of you who represent the numerous ranks of those belonging to Catholic Action in every Italian Diocese.

4. Dear brothers and sisters, your mission on the threshold of the third millennium becomes even more urgent in view of the *new evangelization*. With your daily involvement you are called to foster an ever more fruitful *encounter between the Gospel and culture*, as is required by your Christian-oriented cultural project.

For the Churches in Italy, as I already recalled at the Ecclesial Convention in Palermo, it is a question of renewing the commitment to *authentic Christian spirituality*, so that every baptized person can co-operate with the Holy Spirit, “the principal agent of the new evangelization” (n. 2).

Within this framework your work as members of Catholic Action must be carried out in accordance with *several clear directives*, which I would like to recall here: the faith formation of an adult laity; the development and spreading of a mature Christian conscience which will guide people’s choices of life; leadership in civil society and in culture, in co-operation with all those who put themselves at the service of the human person.

To proceed according to these directions, Catholic Action must strengthen its own nature as an *ecclesial association*, that is, one at the service of the growth of the Christian community, in close union with the ordained ministers. This service requires a living, attentive and willing Catholic Action in order to contribute effectively to *giving ordinary pastoral work a missionary dimension*, to proclamation, to meeting and to dialogue with all, even the baptized, who only partially live their membership in the Church or show attitudes of indifference, aloofness and, perhaps at times, antipathy.

The meeting between the Gospel and culture, in fact, has an intrinsic missionary dimension and

this requires — in the current cultural context and in daily life — the witness and service of the lay faithful, not only as individuals, but also as associates in the service of evangelization. Individuals and associations, precisely because of their secular nature, are called to take the path of sharing and dialogue which leads each day to the proclamation of the Word and to growth in faith.

5. A new meeting between the Gospel and culture is also the soil in which Catholic Action, as an ecclesial association of lay people, can develop a specific and significant *service for the renewal of Italian society*, its morals and its institutions: to give a Christian inspiration to society, civil life and the dynamics of the economy and politics.

Your rich history shows that Christian leadership is particularly necessary in circumstances like those today, when Italy is called to face *issues which are crucial for the future of the country* and its millenary civilization. It is urgently necessary to search for effective strategies and to implement practical solutions, while always keeping in mind the common good and the inalienable dignity of the person. Among the important matters requiring your efforts, we should remember the acceptance of and sacred respect for life, the protection of the family, the defence of the guarantees of freedom and justice in the formation and education of the new generations and the effective recognition of the right to work.

6. Dear brothers and sisters, here is a sketch of your mission on the threshold of the third millennium: *work so that Italy never lacks the shining light of the Gospel*, which you must always proclaim with honesty and live with consistency. Only in this way will you be credible witnesses of Christian hope who can communicate it to everyone.

May Mary “full of grace”, whom we contemplate today radiant in the glory and holiness of God, protect you.

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