

IL FERMO PROPOSITO

ENCYCLICAL OF POPE PIUS X ON CATHOLIC ACTION IN ITALY

JUNE 11, 1905

To the Bishops of Italy.

Venerable Brethren, Health and the Apostolic Blessing.

The firm purpose and desire which We resolved upon at the beginning of Our Pontificate to consecrate all the energy which the good Lord deigns to grant Us in the work of restoring all things in Christ, reawakens in Our heart a great trust in the all powerful grace of God. Without that grace We can neither plan nor undertake anything great or fruitful for the good of souls here below. At the same time, however, We feel more than ever the need of being upheld unanimously and constantly in this venture both by you, Venerable Brethren, called to participate in Our pastoral office, as well as by all the clergy and faithful committed to your care. Truly, all of us in the Church are called to form that unique Body, whose Head is Christ; "closely joined," as the Apostle Paul teaches, "and knit together through every joint of the system according to the functioning in due measure of each single part." [1] In such a way the Body increases and gradually perfects itself in the bond of charity. Now, if in this work of "building up the body of Christ" [2] it is Our primary duty to teach, to point out the correct way to follow, to propose the means to be used, to admonish and paternally exhort, it is also the duty of Our beloved children, dispersed throughout the world, to heed Our words, to carry them out first of all in their own lives, and to aid in their effective fulfillment in others, each one according to the grace of God received, according to his state in life and duties, and according to the zeal which inflames his heart.

2. Here We wish to recall those numerous works of zeal for the good of the Church, society, and individuals under the general name of "Catholic Action," which by the grace of God flourish throughout the world as well as in Our Italy. You well know, Venerable Brethren, how dear they are to Us and how fervently We long to see them strengthened and promoted. Not only have We spoken to not a few of you on many occasions as well as to their special representatives in Italy when they presented Us with the homage of their devotion and filial affection, but We have also published, or have had published by Our authority, various acts of which you already know. It is true that some of these, as the circumstances -- truly sorrowful for Us -- demanded, were directed at removing obstacles which hindered the progress of Catholic Action and caused great harm, by undisciplined tendencies, to the common good. For that reason We hesitated to offer a paternal word of comfort and encouragement to all throughout the world, in order that, only after We had removed as much as We possibly could all dangers throughout the world, the good would be able to increase and spread abroad. We are now, therefore, very happy to do so by this present letter in order to encourage everyone, for We are certain that Our words will be heard in a spirit of docility and obeyed by all.

3. The field of Catholic Action is extremely vast. In itself it does not exclude anything, in any manner, direct or indirect, which pertains to the divine mission of the Church. Accordingly one can plainly see how necessary it is for everyone to cooperate in such an important work, not only for the sanctification of his own soul, but also for the extension and increase of the Kingdom of God in individuals, families, and society; each one working according to his energy for the good of his neighbor by the propagation of revealed truth, by the exercise of Christian virtues, by the exercise of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Such is the conduct worthy of God to which Saint Paul exhorts us, so as to please Him in all things, bringing forth fruits of all good works, and increasing in

the knowledge of God. "May you walk worthily of God and please him in all things, bearing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God."[3]

4. Over and above spiritual goods, however, there are many goods of the natural order over which the Church has no direct mission, although they flow as a natural consequence from her divine mission. The light of Catholic revelation is of such a nature that it diffuses itself with the greatest brilliance on every science. The force of the evangelical counsels is so powerful that it strengthens and firmly establishes the precepts of the natural law. The fruitfulness of the doctrine and morality taught by Jesus Christ is so limitless that providentially it sustains and promotes the material welfare of the individual, the family, and society. The Church, even in preaching Jesus Christ crucified, "stumbling-block and foolishness to the world," has become the foremost leader and protector of civilization. She brought it wherever her apostles preached. She preserved and protected the good elements of the ancient pagan civilizations, disentangling from barbarism and educating for a new civilization the peoples who flocked to her maternal bosom. She endowed every civilization, gradually, but with a certain and always progressive step, with that excellent mark which is today universally preserved. The civilization of the world is Christian. The more completely Christian it is, the more true, more lasting and more productive of genuine fruit it is. On the other hand, the further it draws away from the Christian ideal, the more seriously the social order is endangered. By the very nature of things, the Church has consequently become the guardian and protector of Christian society. That fact was universally recognized and admitted in other periods of history. In truth, it formed a solid foundation for civil legislation. On that very fact rested the relations between Church and State; the public recognition of the authority of the Church in those matters which touched upon conscience in any manner, the subordination of all the laws of the State to the Divine laws of the Gospel; the harmony of the two powers in securing the temporal welfare of the people in such a way that their eternal welfare did not suffer.

5. We have no need to tell you, Venerable Brethren, what prosperity and well-being, what peace and harmony, what respectful subjection to authority and what excellent government would be obtained and maintained in the world if one could see in practice the perfect ideal of Christian civilization. Granting, however, the continual battle of the flesh against the spirit, darkness against light, Satan against God, such cannot be hoped for, at least in all its fullness. Hence, raids are continually being made on the peaceful conquests of the Church. The sadness and pain these cause is accentuated by the fact that society tends more and more to be governed by principles opposed to that very Christian ideal, and is even in danger of completely falling away from God.

6. This fact, however, is no reason to lose courage. The Church well knows that the gates of hell will not prevail against her. Furthermore, she knows that she will be sorely afflicted; that her apostles are sent as lambs among wolves; that her followers will always bear the brunt of hatred and contempt, just as her Divine Founder received hatred and contempt. So the Church advances unafraid, spreading the Kingdom of God wherever she preaches and studying every possible means she can use in regaining the losses in the kingdom already conquered. "To restore all things in Christ" has always been the Church's motto, and it is especially Our Own during these fearful moments through which we are now passing. "To restore all things" -- not in any haphazard fashion, but "in Christ"; and the Apostle adds, "both those in the heavens and those on the earth." [4] "To restore all things in Christ" includes not only what properly pertains to the divine mission of the Church, namely, leading souls to God, but also what We have already explained as flowing from that divine mission, namely, Christian civilization in each and every one of the elements composing it.

7. Since We particularly dwell on this last part of the desired restoration, you clearly see, Venerable Brethren, the services rendered to the Church by those chosen bands of Catholics who aim to unite all their forces in combating anti-Christian civilization by every just and lawful means. They use every means in repairing the serious disorders caused by it. They seek to restore Jesus Christ to the family, the school and society by re-establishing the principle that human authority represents the authority of God. They take to heart the interests of the people, especially those of the working and

agricultural classes, not only by inculcating in the hearts of everybody a true religious spirit (the only true fount of consolation among the troubles of this life) but also by endeavoring to dry their tears, to alleviate their sufferings, and to improve their economic condition by wise measures. They strive, in a word, to make public laws conformable to justice and amend or suppress those which are not so. Finally, they defend and support in a true Catholic spirit the rights of God in all things and the no less sacred rights of the Church.

8. All these works, sustained and promoted chiefly by lay Catholics and whose form varies according to the needs of each country, constitute what is generally known by a distinctive and surely a very noble name: "Catholic Action," or the "Action of Catholics." At all times it came to the aid of the Church, and the Church has always cherished and blessed such help, using it in many ways according to the exigencies of the age.

9. In passing it is well to remark that it is impossible today to re-establish under the same form all the institutions which have been useful and even the only effective ones in past centuries, so numerous the new needs which changing circumstances keep producing. But the Church in its long history and on every occasion has wisely shown that she possesses the marvelous power of adapting herself to the changing conditions of civil society. Thus, while preserving the integrity and immutability of faith and morals and upholding her sacred rights, she easily bends and accommodates herself to all the unessential and accidental circumstances belonging to various stages of civilization and to the new requirements of civil society.

10. "Godliness," says Saint Paul, "is profitable in all respects, since it has the promise of the present life as well as of that which is to come." [5] Even though Catholic Action changes in its external forms and in the means that it adapts, it always remains the same in the principles that direct it and the noble goal that it pursues. In order that Catholic Action may reach its goal, it is important to consider at this point the conditions it imposes, its nature and its goal.

11. Above all, one must be firmly convinced that the instrument is of little value if it is not adapted to the work at hand. In regard to the things We mentioned above, Catholic Action, inasmuch as it proposes to restore all things in Christ, constitutes a real apostolate for the honor and glory of Christ Himself. To carry it out right one must have divine grace, and the apostle receives it only if he is united to Christ. Only when he has formed Jesus Christ in himself shall he more easily be able to restore Him to the family and society. Therefore, all who are called upon to direct or dedicate themselves to the Catholic cause, must be sound Catholics, firm in faith, solidly instructed in religious matters, truly submissive to the Church and especially to this supreme Apostolic See and the Vicar of Jesus Christ. They must be men of real piety, of manly virtue, and of a life so chaste and fearless that they will be a guiding example to all others. If they are not so formed it will be difficult to arouse others to do good and practically impossible to act with a good intention. The strength needed to persevere in continually bearing the weariness of every true apostolate will fail. The calumnies of enemies, the coldness and frightfully little cooperation of even good men, sometimes even the jealousy of friends and fellow workers (excusable, undoubtedly, on account of the weakness of human nature, but also harmful and a cause of discord, offense and quarrels) -- all these will weaken the apostle who lacks divine grace. Only virtue, patient and firm and at the same time mild and tender, can remove or diminish these difficulties in such a way that the works undertaken by Catholic forces will not be compromised. The will of God, Saint Peter wrote the early Christians, is that by your good works you silence the foolish. "For such is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish men." [6]

12. It is also important to define clearly the works which the Catholic forces must energetically and constantly undertake. These works must be of such evident importance that they will be appreciated by everybody. They must bear such a relation to the needs of modern society and be so well adapted to moral and material interests, especially those of the people and the poorer classes, that, while arousing in promoters of Catholic Action the greatest activity for obtaining the important and certain

results which are to be looked for, they may also be readily understood and gladly welcomed by all. Since the serious problems of modern social life demand a prompt and definite solution, everyone is anxious to know and understand the different ways in which these solutions can be put into practice. Discussions of one kind or another are more and more numerous and rapidly published by the press. It is, therefore, of the greatest importance that Catholic Action seize the present moment and courageously propose its own solution, strengthening it by means of solid propaganda which at the same time will be active, intelligent, disciplined and organized against all erroneous doctrine. The goodness and justice of Christian principles, the true morality which Catholics profess, their evident unconcern for their own welfare while wishing nothing but the supreme good of others, and their open and sincere ability to foster better than all others the true economic interests of the people -- these qualities cannot fail to make an impression on the minds and hearts of all who hear them, and to swell their ranks so as to form a strong and compact corps, capable of boldly resisting the opposing current and of commanding the respect of their enemies. 13. Our Predecessor, Leo XIII, of blessed memory, has pointed out, especially in that memorable encyclical "Rerum Novarum" and in later documents, the object to which Catholic Action should be particularly devoted, namely, "the practical solution of the social question according to Christian principles." Following these wise rules, We Ourselves in Our motu proprio of December 18, 1903, concerning Popular Christian Action-which in itself embraces the whole Catholic social movement -- We Ourselves have laid down fundamental principles which should serve as a practical rule of action as well as a bond of harmony and charity. On these documents, therefore and within their most holy and necessary scope, Catholic Action, although varied and multiple in form while directed toward the same social good, must be regulated and united.

14. In order that this social action may continue and prosper by a necessary union of the various activities comprising it, Catholics above all must preserve a spirit of peace and harmony which can come only from a unity in understanding. On this point there cannot exist the least shadow or peradventure of a doubt, so clear and obvious are the teachings handed down by this Apostolic See, so brilliant is the light which most illustrious Catholics of every country have spread by their writings, so praiseworthy is the example of Catholics of other countries who, because of this harmony and unity of understanding, in a short time have reaped an abundant harvest.

15. To arrive at this end, in some places several of these praiseworthy works have called into being an institution of a general character which goes by the name of the "Popular Union." Experience has shown that this has been most effective. The purpose of the Popular Union has been to gather all Catholics, and especially the masses, around a common center of doctrine, propaganda, and social organization. Since, in fact, it answers a need felt in almost every country and its constitution is founded upon the very nature of things, it cannot be said to belong any more to one nation than another, but is suitable to every place where the same needs are present and the same dangers arise. Its extremely popular character causes it to be most desirable and acceptable. It neither disturbs nor hinders the work of existing institutions but, on the contrary, increases their strength and efficiency. Because of its strictly personal organization, it spurs individuals to enter particular institutions, training them to perform practical and useful work, and uniting them all together in one common aim and desire.

16. Once the social center is thus established, all other institutions of an economic character concerned in various ways with the social problem will find themselves spontaneously united by their common end. At the same time, however, they will preserve their own individual structure, and in providing various needs they will still remain within the boundaries which their sphere of influence demands. At this point We are pleased to express Our satisfaction with the great good which in this regard has already been accomplished in Italy, and We feel certain that, with the help of God, much more will be done by this kind of zeal in the future to strengthen and increase the good already accomplished. The work of the Catholic Congresses and Committees is of singular merit, thanks to the intelligent activity of those capable men who plan and direct them. Such economic centers and

unions, however, as We have previously stated at the end of the above-mentioned Congresses, must continue to carry on in the same way and under the same expert direction.

17. For Catholic Action to be most effective it is not enough that it adapt itself to social needs only. It must also employ all those practical means which the findings of social and economic studies place in its hands. It must profit from the experience gained elsewhere. It must be vitally aware of the conditions of civil society, and the public life of states. Otherwise it runs the risk of wasting time in searching for novelties and hazardous theories while overlooking the good, safe and tried means at hand. Again, perhaps it may propose institutions and methods belonging to other times but no longer understood by the people of the present day. Or, finally, it may go only half way, failing to use, in the measure in which they are granted, those civil rights which modern constitutions today offer all, and therefore also Catholics. In particular, the present constitution of states offers indiscriminately to all the right to influence public opinion, and Catholics, with due respect for the obligations imposed by the law of God and the precepts of the Church, can certainly use this to their advantage. In such a way they can prove themselves as capable as others (in fact, more capable than others) by cooperating in the material and civil welfare of the people. In so doing they shall acquire that authority and prestige which will make them capable of defending and promoting a higher good, namely, that of the soul.

18. These civil rights are of various kinds, even to the extent of directly participating in the political life of the country by representing the people in the legislative halls. Most serious reasons, however, dissuade Us, Venerable Brethren, from departing from that norm which Our Predecessor, Leo XIII, of blessed memory, decreed during his Pontificate. According to his decree it was universally forbidden in Italy for Catholics to participate in the legislative power. Other reasons equally grave, however, founded upon the supreme good of society which must be preserved at all costs demand that in particular cases a dispensation from the law be granted especially when you, Venerable Brethren, recognize the strict necessity of it for the good of souls and the interest of your churches, and you request such a dispensation.

19. This concession places a duty on all Catholics to prepare themselves prudently and seriously for political life in case they may be called to it. Hence it is of the utmost importance that the same activity (previously so praiseworthy planned by Catholics for the purpose of preparing themselves by means of good electoral organization for the administrative life of common and provincial councils) be extended to a suitable preparation and organization for political life. This was already recommended by the Circular of December 3, 1904, issued by the general Presidency of Economic Works in Italy. At the same time the other principles which regulate the conscience of every true Catholic must be inculcated and put into practice. Above all else he must remember to be and to act in every circumstance as a true Catholic, accepting and fulfilling public offices with the firm and constant resolution of promoting by every means the social and economic welfare of the country and particularly of the people, according to the maxims of a truly Christian civilization, and at the same time defending the supreme interests of the Church, which are those of religion and justice.

20. Such, Venerable Brethren, are the characteristics, the aim and conditions of Catholic Action, considered in its most important function, namely, the solution of the social question. For that reason it demands the most energetic attention of all the Catholic forces. By no means, however, does this exclude the existence of other activities nor does it mean that other organizations should not flourish and be promoted, for each one is directed to different particular goods of society and of the people. All are united in the work of restoring Christian civilization under its various aspects. These works, rising out of the zeal of particular persons, spreading throughout many dioceses, are sometimes grouped into federations. Since the end they foster is praiseworthy, the Christian principles they follow solid, and the means they adopt just, they are to be praised and encouraged in every way. At the same time, they must be permitted a certain freedom of organization (since it is impossible for so many people to be formed in the same mold and placed under the same direction). Organization, therefore, must arise spontaneously from the works themselves, otherwise it will only be an

ephemeral building of fine architecture, but lacking a solid foundation and therefore quite unstable. Particular characteristics of different people must also be taken into consideration. Different uses, different tendencies are found in different places. It is of primary importance that the work be built on a good foundation of solid principles and maintained with earnestness and constancy. If this is the case, the method used and the form the various works take will be accidental.

21. In order to renew and increase in all the Catholic works necessary enthusiasm; in order to offer an occasion for the promoters and members of these works to see each other and become better acquainted; in order to strengthen the bond of charity, to inspire one another with a great zeal for fruitful activity, and to provide for the greater solidity and propagation of the works themselves, it will be very useful from time to time to hold general and particular Congresses of Italian Catholics, according to the norms already laid down by this Holy See. These Congresses, however, must be a solemn manifestation of the Catholic Faith and a festival of mutual harmony and peace.

22. We must touch, Venerable Brethren, on another point of extreme importance, namely, the relation of all the works of Catholic Action to ecclesiastical authority. If the teachings unfolded in the first part of this letter are thoughtfully considered it will be readily seen that all those works which directly come to the aid of the spiritual and pastoral ministry of the Church and which labor religiously for the good of souls must in every least thing be subordinated to the authority of the Church and also to the authority of the Bishops placed by the Holy Spirit to rule the Church of God in the dioceses assigned to them. Moreover, the other works which, as We have said, are primarily designed for the restoration and promotion of true Christian civilization and which, as explained above, constitute Catholic Action, by no means may be considered as independent of the counsel and direction of ecclesiastical authority, especially since they must all conform to the principles of Christian faith and morality. At the same time it is impossible to imagine them as in opposition, more or less openly, to that same authority. Such works, however, by their very nature, should be directed with a reasonable degree of freedom, since responsible action is especially theirs in the temporal and economic affairs as well as in those matters of public administration and political life. These affairs are alien to the purely spiritual ministry. Since Catholics, on the other hand, are to raise always the banner of Christ, by that very fact they also raise the banner of the Church. Thus it is no more than right that they receive it from the hands of the Church, that the Church guard its immaculate honor, and that Catholics submit as docile, loving children to this maternal vigilance.

23. For these reasons it is evident how terribly wrong those few were who in Italy, and under Our very eyes, wanted to undertake a mission which they received neither from Us nor from any of Our Brethren in the episcopate. They promoted it not only without due homage to authority but even openly against the will of that authority, seeking to rationalize their disobedience by foolish distinctions. They said that they were undertaking their cause in the name of Christ; but such a cause could not be Christ's since it was not built on the doctrine of the Divine Redeemer. How truly these words apply: "He who hears you, hears me; and he who rejects you, rejects me." [7] "He who is not with me is against me; and he who does not gather with me scatters." [8] This is a doctrine of humility, submission, filial respect. With extreme regret We had to condemn this tendency and halt by Our authority this pernicious movement which was rapidly gaining momentum. Our sorrow was increased when We saw many young people of excellent character and fervent zeal and capable of performing much good if properly directed, and who are also very dear to Us, carelessly attracted to such an erroneous program.

24. While pointing out the true nature of Catholic Action, Venerable Brethren, We cannot minimize the grave danger to which the clergy may find themselves exposed because of the conditions of the time. They may attach such importance to the material interests of the people that they will forget those more important duties of the sacred ministry.

25. The priest, raised above all men in order to accomplish the mission he has from God, must also remain above all human interests, all conflicts, all classes of society. His proper field of action is the Church. There, as ambassador of God, he preaches the truth, teaching along with respect for the rights of God respect also for the rights of every creature. In such a work he neither exposes himself to any opposition nor appears as a man of factions, ally to one group and adversary to others. In such a way he will not place himself in the danger of dissimulating the truth, of keeping silence in the conflict of certain tendencies, or of irritating exasperated souls by repeated arguments. In all these cases he would fail in his real duty. It is unnecessary to add that while treating so often of material affairs he may find himself obligated to perform tasks harmful to himself and to the dignity of his office. He may take part in these associations, therefore, only after mature deliberation, with the consent of his Bishop, and then only in those cases when his assistance will be free from every danger and will be obviously useful.

26. This does-not diminish his zeal. The true apostle must make himself "all things to all men"[9] in order to save all. Like the Divine Redeemer, he ought to be moved with compassion, "seeing the crowds . . . bewildered and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd." [10] By means of the printed and spoken word, by direct participation in the above-mentioned cases, he can labor on behalf of the people according to the principles of justice and charity by favoring and promoting those institutions which propose to protect the masses from the invasion of Socialism, saving them at the same time from both economic ruin and moral and religious chaos. In this way the assistance of the clergy in the works of Catholic Action has a truly religious purpose. It will then not be a hindrance, but rather a help, to the spiritual ministry by enlarging its sphere and multiplying its results.

27. You see now, Venerable Brethren, how much We have desired to explain and inculcate these principles concerning Catholic Action which is to be sustained and promoted in Italy. It is not sufficient to point out the good; it also must be put into practice. Your own exhortations and paternal interest will render an inestimable service to the cause. Although the beginnings are humble, as is the case in all beginnings, divine grace will cause it to grow and prosper in a short time. All Our children who dedicate themselves to Catholic Action should once again listen to the advice which arises so spontaneously from Our heart. Amid the bitter sorrows which daily surround Us, We will say with Saint Paul, "if . . . there is any comfort in Christ, any encouragement from charity, any fellowship in the Spirit, any feelings of mercy, fill up my joy by thinking alike, having the same charity, with one soul and one mind. Do nothing out of contentiousness or out of vainglory, but in humility let each one regard the others as his superiors, each one looking not to his own interests but to those of others. Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus." [11] Let Him be the beginning of all your undertakings: "Whatever you do in word or in work, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ." [12] Let Him be the end of your every word: "For from him and through him and unto him are all things. To him be the glory forever." [13] On this day which is so reminiscent of that when the Apostles, full of the Holy Spirit, went out of the Cenacle to preach to the world the Kingdom of Christ, may the power of that same Spirit descend upon all of you. "May He bend whatever is rigid, inflame whatever has grown cold, and bring back whatever has gone astray." [14] 28. May the Apostolic Blessing which We impart from the bottom of Our heart to you, Venerable Brethren, and your clergy and the Italian people, be a sign of divine favor and a pledge of Our very special affection.

29. Given at Saint Peter's, Rome, on the Feast of Pentecost, June 11, 1905, the second year of Our Pontificate.

ENDNOTES 1. Eph. 4:16. 2. Eph. 4:12. 3. Col. 1:10. 4. Eph. 1:10. 5. I Tim. 4:8. 6. I Pet. 2:15. 7. Luke 10:16. 8. Luke 11:23. 9. I Cor. 9:22. 10. Matt. 9:36. 11. Phil. 2:1-5. 12. Col. 3:17. 13. Rom. 11:36. 14. "Veni Sancte Spiritus," Sequence of the Mass of Pentecost.