



75th Extraordinary General Assembly of the Italian Bishops' Conference

(Rome, November 22-25, 2021)

Final Communiqué

«How does that “journeying together”, which allows the Church to proclaim the Gospel in accordance with the mission entrusted to Her, manifest itself today in my local Church or in the ecclesial reality entrusted to me? How does that “journeying together”, which allows the Church to proclaim the Gospel in accordance with the mission entrusted to Her, manifest itself in our episcopal collegiality?» These two questions, drawing on the fundamental question of the Universal Synod, provided the inspiring backdrop for the 75th Extraordinary General Assembly of the Italian Bishops' Conference, held in Rome (at the Ergife Palace Hotel) on November 22-25, 2021. The Assembly, presided over by Cardinal President Gualtiero Bassetti, was opened by a private meeting with Pope Francis.

The opening address by the President of the Italian Episcopal Conference was met with great praise and recognition, reflected in the remarks and reflections of the Bishops who voiced their concern over the social and environmental situation that risks negatively affecting young people and the weakest members of society. They pointed out that the Synodal journey offers an opportunity for encounter and for listening to all, especially those who are experiencing difficulties in living the life of the Church or who are disillusioned. In this respect, the creation of “synodal groups” of Bishops provided the opportunity for fraternal exchange in the light of pastoral service in their respective communities and for broader collegiality. It has been a true exercise of synodality, carried out and practised in communion with the episcopal ministry. This has made it possible to fully embrace the value of narrating one's own experiences: the Lord is present in personal and community life.

Highlights included the speech by Cardinal Mario Grech, Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, who illustrated the synodal path leading up to the celebration of the Synod of Bishops in October 2023.

The reform of Book VI of the Code of Canon Law, the adaptation of the CEI Guidelines and norms for seminaries in the light of the Ratio fundamentalis institutionis sacerdotalis, the Sovvenire project, the 50th anniversary of Caritas Italy and the 100th anniversary of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, were among the other items on the agenda.

The Apostolic Nuncio to Italy, Monsignor Emil Paul Tscherrig, 212 members and 16 Bishops Emeritus, a representative group of priests, men and women religious, secular institutes and the National Council of Lay Associations also attended the meeting.

On the sidelines of the Assembly meeting, the Permanent Council approved the message of the

Bishops' Commission for Ecumenism and Dialogue marking the 33rd Day for Deepening and Developing the Dialogue between Catholics and Jews (17 January 2022); it recognised the Italian Association of Professors of Church History at national level as a private association of believers, approving its statutes; it received an update on the activity subsequent to the publication of the three new Instructions of the Congregation for Catholic Education regulating the aggregation, incorporation, and affiliation of ecclesiastical institutes of higher learning (December 8, 2020). Finally, the Permanent Council made a number of appointments.

In dialogue with Pope Francis

The private meeting with Pope Francis opened the 75th Extraordinary General Assembly held in Rome on 22-25 November. The meeting, which lasted almost two hours, had as its theme the style for living this time, fraught with difficulties while, at the same time, offering many opportunities arising from the synodal journey. The Church is confronted with ever-new challenges calling for heightened awareness of the mission, of pastoral service and of the shared responsibilities of all the baptised. Proximity, attentive care, a listening ear and a welcoming attitude are the traits Pope Francis returned to emphasise, which should constitute the visiting card of Christian communities. These traits must primarily be reflected in the lives of the shepherds, called to imitate the Good Shepherd depicted in the text called “The Beatitudes of the Bishop” which the Pope gave to all the Italian bishops meeting in plenary assembly.

Mutual, collegial listening

The reflection on the Synodal journey, concretised in a true exercise of synodality among the Bishops, was the guiding thread of the Extraordinary General Assembly. In fact, considerable time was devoted to the work of the “synodal groups” - providing the opportunity for fraternal exchange in the light of pastoral service in the respective communities and for enhanced collegiality. It constituted a further opportunity for the Bishops to exchange views and opinions on paths to be developed at territorial level, in accordance with the requests of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops and in keeping with the five-year roadmap set out by the Italian Episcopal Conference.

The need to relinquish all forms of self-absorption emerged strongly, encouraging the involvement of the laity and attentive listening to all the baptised, especially those who have stopped attending church services or whose baptismal fire has been extinguished. Referring to the final invitation expressed by the Cardinal President in his Introduction, the Bishops highlighted the importance of opening our hearts and ears to all those who, for various reasons, have remained on the margins of ecclesial life. The Church is called to show her merciful face in response to the wounds that people have suffered. However, this requires embarking on a journey, sharing its inherent hardships, creating silence to give voice to what the “People of God” have to say. It was stressed that our present time is a time of courage and prophecy, which are fundamental for bridging the gap separating the Gospel from life and for rebuilding hope in a fast paced society where the weakest are often left behind, which succumbs to the fickle allure of changing trends, which adopts new languages and focuses on the individual. The challenge entrusted to us by the Pope, the Bishops recalled, is to lend a listening ear to all, that is, to extend the first phase of the Synodal process to those outside it. Of course, not everyone will participate, but everyone must feel that they are invited. If each pastoral worker, in obedience to the creativity of the Holy Spirit, acts as moderator of a synodal group in their local community, in the various contexts in which people live, meet, care for each other, study and work, it will truly be a far-reaching experience of synodality.

Synodal journey and pastoral conversion

For the Prelates, the Synodal Journey must become a propitious occasion for personal and community conversion, a prerequisite for instilling renewed fervour into Proclamation and vigour into a frayed and old ecclesial and social fabric. This involves adopting a new manner of listening, inventing something original that was previously non-existent or only existed sporadically, making room for each person's creativity, activating pathways leading to communion: with the poor, the stranger, the disoriented, the anger-ridden, non-believers or those who have lost the faith, those who have faith only in science, those who feel distant, those who profess another religion or belong to another Christian tradition. Likewise, echoing the remarks of the Cardinal President, the Shepherds agreed on the need to ensure that presbyters, participatory bodies and groups of pastoral workers (catechists, ministers, charity workers, liturgical animators, associations and movements) are duly involved. While passing enthusiasms or disappointments may obstruct the path, grateful memory is a source of encouragement. It has been pointed out that the Synodal journey of the Churches in Italy does not start from scratch. In fact, it complements the reception process of Second Vatican Council ecclesiology. The reflections of the past decades and the Council documents constitute a beacon that unceasingly illuminates the first steps taken and those to come. Over these last few weeks, the Bishops said, the local Churches have contributed an exceptional treasure of initiatives and proposals for the Synodal journey. The diocesan sites bear witness to this. For all, setting out on this journey has been an experience of a Church on the move. The Bishops, it has been emphasised, have set forth together since the Assembly May last, and even more so since last fall, in concord, that is, with a shared heart, forming a symphony whose different sounds and instruments are creating a beautiful harmony. Many pastoral workers are appreciating the relevance of this synodal event. There may well be perplexities, but even perplexities are helpful and indeed necessary for proceeding in the best possible way, and to ensure the high standards of the Synodal path. During the Moment of Reflection for the beginning of the Synodal journey on 9 October last, Pope Francis - quoting Father Congar's words - said "there is no need to create another Church, but to create a different Church". That is the challenge: a Church that is more Gospel-centred, more ingrained in people's lives.

Close to the weakest

The Cardinal President's appeal for further efforts to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus resonated with the assembly. Concerns over the ongoing phenomenon of "abuses and wrongs against the human person" were shared by the whole Assembly. The unacceptable tragedy of migrants on both sea and land routes, at the gates of Europe and at national borders, stirs human consciences and calls for a response inspired by the four verbs indicated by Pope Francis: to welcome, to protect, to promote and to integrate. Caring for the most vulnerable is the only way to build a world of peace and wellbeing for all. For the Church in Italy - it was said - proximity towards the weakest is a choice that is renewed every day in charity and truth. In this respect, the Bishops express their deep closeness and solidarity with those who find themselves in a state of fragility, recalling that the sacredness of every human life does not diminish even when illness and suffering would seem to undermine its value. Having compassion for those who are ill means supporting them with appropriate therapies and with love, restoring their hope in Christ, the Divine Physician and Healer. For this reason, the Presidency of the Italian Bishops' Conference renews the request to enforce consistently and extensively the law on palliative care and pain therapy. These practices can restore dignity to the lives of the sick, including those with incurable illnesses and

those who appear to have lost the meaning of their existence.

The Assembly was also presented with an update on the initiatives and structures put in place to date to combat the scourge of abuse of minors and vulnerable persons, inside and outside the Church, by the President of the National Service for the Protection of Minors, H.E. Monsignor Lorenzo Ghizzoni, Archbishop of Ravenna-Cervia, following the publication of the Guidelines in June 2019. The Guidelines have undoubtedly marked a turning point in the approach to this very serious phenomenon. This is reflected in the educational efforts made in ecclesial communities (seminaries, formation institutes, parishes, oratories, counselling centres, associations, movements, etc.) providing educational guidance concerning affective and sexual maturity; in the creation of a network of Contact Persons in the Services for the Protection of Minors in dioceses across Italy and Listening Centres for the purpose of collecting complaints and reports; the publication of three Manuals for the formation of pastoral workers and for implementing risk prevention measures and safer environments; the promotion of a number of information and formation meetings for the clergy and members of religious orders, catechists and lay educators and coaches and Caritas workers; the celebration of the National Day of Prayer on November 18, a date chosen by Europe to combat the phenomenon and support the victims. Further steps will be taken along these lines to implement and intensify measures to protect minors and vulnerable persons. The Bishops reiterated that the Church intends to always be close to the victims, to all the victims, to whom she will continue to offer attentive listening, support and closeness, never forgetting the suffering they have undergone.

Other items

A number of separate items were communicated concerning the reform of Book VI of the Code of Canon Law, which will come into force on 8 December, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception; the adaptation of the CEI Guidelines and norms for seminaries in the light of the *Ratio fundamentalis institutionis sacerdotalis*, which will be further updated; the outcome of the 49th Social Week held in Taranto October 21-24, 2021; the Sovvenire project, the 50th anniversary of Caritas Italy and the 100th anniversary of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart. A briefing also addressed the implementation of the *Motu Proprio Spiritus Domini*, whereby Pope Francis established that the instituted ministries of Acolyte and Lector are open to both men and women, and the *Motu Proprio Antiquum Ministerium*, instituting the ministry of Catechist. In order to proceed with their institution, as was already expressed at the General Assembly in May, it is necessary to await the indications of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, due to publish the Rite of Institution of the lay ministry of Catechist and subsequently the modifications to the Rite for the institution of acolytes and lectors. Alongside the publication of the said documents, the ongoing work of reflection and discernment carried out by the Bishops' Commission for the Doctrine of the Faith, Proclamation and Catechesis, and by the Bishops' Commission for the Liturgy, will serve as a precious tool for appropriately responding to the requests set out in the Apostolic Letters, in the light of the criteria established by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. For this reason, it is essential to wait for every action at the local level to be carried out in accordance with this path.

The Permanent Council, convened on the sidelines of the Assembly, has approved the message of the Bishops' Commission for Ecumenism and Dialogue on the occasion of the 33rd Day for Deepening and Developing the Dialogue between Catholics and Jews (January 17, 2022), entitled

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“I will fulfil my good promise” (Jer 29:10);); it recognised the Italian Association of Professors of Church History at national level as a private association of believers, approving its statutes; it received an update on the activity subsequent to the publication of the three new Instructions of the Congregation for Catholic Education regulating the aggregation, incorporation, and affiliation of ecclesiastical institutes of higher learning (December 8, 2020). Finally, the Permanent Council made a number of appointments.

In its meeting of November 22, 2021, the Presidency appointed:

- CEI Delegate for International Eucharistic Congresses: Most Rev. Monsignor Gianmarco BUSCA, Bishop of Mantua, President of the Episcopal Commission for the Liturgy.

The Permanent Episcopal Council, in its meeting of 24 November 2021, made the following appointments:

- Member of the Episcopal Commission for the Doctrine of the Faith, Proclamation and Catechesis: Most Rev. Msgr. Giovanni INTINI, Bishop of Tricarico;

- Member of the Episcopal Commission for the Clergy and Consecrated Life: Most Rev. Msgr. Piero DELBOSCO, Bishop of Cuneo and Fossano;

- Director of Caritas Italy: Don Marco PAGNIELLO (Pescara - Penne);

- General Assistant of the Italian Association of European Catholic Guides and Scouts (AIGSEC): Fr Zbigniew Szczepan FORMELLA, SDB;

- National Ecclesiastical Consultant of the Italian Catholic Press Union (UCSI): Father Giuseppe RIGGIO, SJ.

Rome, November 25, 2021