



CONFERENCE FOR PRESIDENTS AND REPRESENTATIVES OF EPISCOPAL COMMISSIONS FOR THE LAITY

Pastors and lay faithful called to go forward together
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OPENING ADDRESS

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Warm greetings to everyone here present today -- lay people, bishops and priests. Many of you are here representing the bishops' conferences of your countries and others are here on behalf of international associations of the faithful and ecclesial movements. I will begin by first clarifying the origin and purpose of our meeting. As I said in the press conference, this will help us to see where we want to go with this meeting.

1. The origin and purpose of this conference

First of all, let us speak about the origin. This conference stems from the Plenary Assembly of the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life in November 2019. In our reflections and conversations at that time, it clearly emerged that we need to study

further the role of responsibility pertaining to every baptised person in the Church. All members of the People of God, pastors and lay faithful alike, share full responsibility for the life, mission, care, management and growth of the People of God. There is a need to go beyond the approach of ‘delegation’ or that of ‘substitution’ where the laity are ‘delegated’ by the pastors for some sporadic service, or the laity ‘substitute’ for clerics in some functions, yet they are working in isolation. All of this seems to be somewhat reductive. During the Plenary Assembly, we felt a renewed call from the Lord to “go forward together” in taking responsibility in serving the Christian community. Each of us does so according to our individual vocation. We do not adopt an attitude of superiority, but rather we pool our energies as we share the mission of proclaiming the Gospel to the men and women of our time. Hence the title of the Conference: ‘Pastors and lay faithful called to go forward together’.

In his address to the participants at that Plenary Assembly, the Holy Father placed great emphasis on unity among the People of God. He said:

“It is important to always put forward positive models of collaboration among laity, priests and consecrated persons, between pastors and the faithful, between diocesan and parish bodies, movements and lay associations, between young people and the elderly; to avoid confrontation and antagonism and always encourage collaboration in fellowship for the common good of our joint family that is the Church” (Address 16 November 2019).

The Dicastery is trying to encourage this model of ‘integrated pastoral care’ and of positive collaboration and shared responsibility within the Church in all the areas that lie within our competence: in the area of family pastoral care, in the area of youth pastoral care, and, more generally, as this conference proposes to do, in reference to the lay faithful.

With regard to the purpose of the conference, it is intended to raise awareness among pastors and laity alike of the significance of the responsibility that stems from baptism and that unites us all. We see the need for adequate training -- for pastors and for laity -- so that this shared responsibility is actually practised. It is not yet normal for pastors and laity to work side by side, each according to his or her charism and abilities. In all spheres within the Church there would be great achievements if everyone brought their point of view, their spiritual gifts, their professional skills and their availability of time, knowledge, and life experiences. This sort of active and responsible presence by the laity in the Church obviously does not detract from their primary mission of being leaven in society and in the ordinary spheres of life: work, school, media, culture, sport, politics and the economy. These are certainly the ordinary fields of Christian witness on the part of the laity, but we must avoid any rigid and exclusivist vision that completely excludes the laity from active involvement in Church life.

2. This conference in the context of the synodal journey of the Church

As we have already said, we have been focusing on the theme of the conference for the past three years. It is because of the pandemic that it is only now possible for all of us to come together to reflect on this together. Providentially, the Synodal Pathway started in the meantime and this has strengthened our intention. It places the conference against the backdrop of the commitment of the whole Church to ‘go forward together’. This is, as you know, the meaning of the word ‘synod’, and it is also in the title of the conference.

In a document by the International Theological Commission on “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church”, we read that “Synodality means that the whole Church is a ‘subject’ and that everyone in the Church is a ‘subject’” (no. 55). The

Church is a ‘community subject’ that knows it has the same spirit, the same feeling, the same faith and the same mission and therefore constitutes a true unitary body. In this sense it is not a federation. But in this single ‘subject’, individual personalities are not annulled. On the contrary, everyone in the Church must be an active ‘subject’: all are called to bring their original contribution to the life and mission of the Church, and all are called to think for themselves and make use of their respective charisms. When we emphasise that the Church is a ‘community subject’ and a community of ‘active subjects’, this leads us precisely to recognition of the ‘sense of being Church’ of all the lay faithful with their uniqueness and their charisms.

3. Encouraging the lay faithful -- some practical recommendations

Lumen Gentium, the Second Vatican Council Constitution on the Church, states:

“Let the spiritual shepherds recognize and promote the dignity as well as the responsibility of the laity in the Church. Let them willingly employ their prudent advice. Let them confidently assign duties to them in the service of the Church, allowing them freedom and room for action. Further, let them encourage lay people so that they may undertake tasks on their own initiative. Attentively in Christ, let them consider with fatherly love the projects, suggestions and desires proposed by the laity.” (LG 37)

These recommendations from the Council give a whole programme of instruction for pastors in relation to the laity. It also gives some very important practical suggestions. First of all, it says that we are to recognise and promote the dignity and responsibility of the lay faithful. Secondly, we are told to have recourse to their advice. Third, it says to confidently entrust the laity with assignments in the service of the Church. Fourth, the laity should be given a free hand and indeed be encouraged to take initiatives. Fifth, due consideration should be given to their intentions and desires. I will dwell on two of these aspects.

First of all, let us look at the invitation to consult the laity. Every priest and every bishop should feel the need to consult the laity before undertaking any important initiative in his diocese or parish. The strong conviction that drives an ordained minister to listen to the voice of his people stems from the certainty that divine grace is already bestowed and at work in every baptised person. This grace creates in each person a ‘sense of being Church’. It helps each one to perceive where the good of the Church can be pursued and achieved.

This does not detract from a bishop's personal responsibility for the decisions to be taken. The International Theological Commission document states:

“In a diocese, for example, it is necessary to distinguish between the process of *decision-making* through a joint exercise of discernment, consultation and co-operation, and *decision-taking*, which is within the competence of the bishop, the guarantor of apostolicity and Catholicity. Working things out is a synodal task; decision is a ministerial responsibility. (ITC no. 69).

Lumen Gentium also invites us to entrust lay people with ecclesial offices that by their nature do not need to be filled by the clergy. Lay people who show that they have the required skills and those special spiritual gifts that can be of great benefit to the whole Church should be assigned to these offices. In his letter addressed to the People of God in Germany (no. 9), the pope reminds us that, in addition to the baptismal grace common to all, the faithful also have “special graces” -- “By these gifts God makes them fit and ready to undertake the various tasks and offices which contribute toward the renewal and building up of the Church” (LG 12).

It is good to remember, in this regard, that there are many areas in which the laity are often more competent than priests and consecrated persons. To give but a few examples: the field of economic administration and finance; the field of civil law and,

for those who have pursued specific studies, even canon law (think, for example, of marriage annulment procedures; the field of biolaw and bioethics (especially for lay people who have studied medicine); the field of dialogue between science and faith (especially for lay people who have a scientific academic background); the field of social communications; the field of the arts as a place of witness and evangelisation. Beyond these areas, the presence and action of the lay faithful is also of great benefit in the Church in more properly ‘ecclesial’ activities such as evangelisation and charitable work. In these contexts, too, people frequently show great zeal and resourcefulness. They have the courage to explore new avenues and to try new methods of outreach, often in places where there is a shortage of clergy or in places where people are accustomed to more traditional and less ‘inconvenient’ methodologies and practices. Such is the case, for example, of ‘street’ evangelisation or the evangelisation of certain ‘social environments’. In our Dicastery we are in contact with numerous associations of the faithful that were founded by individuals who were eager to bring the proclamation of the Gospel to places where people come together and work: university campuses, military environments, the world of sports, etc. Pastors must certainly watch over and accompany all these initiatives taken by the laity, but they must always have great confidence in people’s discernment and fidelity to the Gospel of Christ and his Church.

I hope that you find these two days of listening, dialogue and exchange to be of benefit. May it help you, when you return to your countries, to cultivate the participation of all the People of God in the life and mission of the Church.

Thank you and enjoy the conference.