



**DICASTERIUM
PRO LAICIS, FAMILIA ET VITA**

DICASTERY FOR LAITY, FAMILY AND LIFE

III PLENARY ASSEMBLY

“Until Christ be formed in you” (Gal 4:19): The formation of the laity in Christian life and the experience of World Meetings

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Introductory Address by Card. Farrell

Dear members and consultors—brothers in the episcopate, priests, brothers and sisters in Christ—a warm welcome to this third Plenary Assembly of the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life. First of all, I thank you for your presence, for interrupting your ordinary work and your occupations so as to make yourselves available for our meeting. A special greeting goes to the members whom the Holy Father has most recently appointed and who are participating in the Plenary Assembly of the Dicastery for the first time. I would like to take this opportunity to introduce the Adjunct Secretary of the Dicastery, whom the Holy Father appointed in October 2024: Monsignor Dario Gervasi, formerly Auxiliary Bishop of the Diocese of Rome.

The Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* states that, “All the members of the Dicastery are convoked for the plenary session,” and that “Matters and questions of greater importance are reserved for the plenary session, according to the nature of the Dicastery” (art 26 §3). The new General Regulations of the Roman

Curia, which came into effect in January this year, specify that the matters of major importance dealt with in the Plenary Session are those “which are of a general nature, or others which the Head of the Dicastery deems necessary” (Art 18 §1). Therefore, holding a focus on “matters of major importance” and those that are “of a general nature,” instead of specific, procedural, or organizational matters. This is the approach that is suggested for the Plenary.

In order to give you a better understanding of the “matters of major importance” dealt with by the Dicastery, I would like to briefly share some of the work that has been done in recent years.

1. A look at the journey of recent years

The Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life was established in 2016. So far, there have been two Plenary Assemblies. The first was held in 2019, and had as its theme: “The Lay Faithful, Identity and Mission in the World”. The second Plenary Assembly was held in 2023, and carried the theme: “The Laity and ministeriality in a synodal Church”.

In the area of Associations and Movements, eight *Annual Meetings of the moderators* of Associations of the faithful and Ecclesial Movements have been held in recent years, and there has been intense activity to accompany these ecclesial realities through meetings in the Dicastery, revision of statutes, and formation or accompaniment initiatives where problematic aspects have been identified.

With regard to the area of Family and Life, two World Meetings of Families have been held since 2016: the first in Dublin in 2018, and the second in Rome in 2022. In 2022, the Dicastery published the *Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life*, so as to introduce into the Church a vocational and remote path for preparation for the

sacrament of marriage and accompaniment in the first years of married life. Starting in 2025, using the resource, *Life is Always a Good*, work began to accompany the pastoral care of life of numerous episcopal conferences.

In the area of youth ministry, from 2016 to the present, *World Youth Day* has been celebrated internationally in Panama in 2019, and then in Lisbon in 2023, with preparations underway for the next occasion in Seoul in 2027. Furthermore, WYD ought not remain as isolated events, but should be preceded and followed by ordinary and ongoing youth ministry at the local church level. To this end, the *Pastoral Guidelines for the Celebration of World Youth Day in the Particular Churches* have been published.

In the area of pastoral care of the elderly, the Dicastery has urged particular Churches to structure or strengthen the pastoral care of the elderly, recognizing them as an active and numerically increasingly significant component of the Catholic laity. To date, two International Congresses on the Pastoral Care of the Elderly have been held, firstly in 2020 and then in 2025, and dialogue with the national leaders for the pastoral care of the elderly from some 80 episcopal conferences has been strengthened.

In addition to these events and initiatives, which have greater resonance and visibility in the media, there is also the ordinary, hidden, and less visible, but equally important and very demanding work which the Dicastery carries out on a daily basis. This includes meetings with bishops during their *Visit ad limina*, contacts and correspondence with many bishops around the world on various issues, and contacts with associations and organizations that are more closely involved in family ministry or youth ministry.

All this work is carried out daily by the superiors and officials of the Dicastery. At present, in addition to the Secretary, the Adjunct Secretary, and the two Undersecretaries, 28 officials of 10 different nationalities work in the Dicastery, 3 of whom are clergy, while all the others are lay people, some of whom are married with children, while others live a life of special dedication to God in celibacy.

2. The theme of the Plenary

Let us now turn to the theme of this Plenary. It is indicated by the title: “*Until Christ be formed in you*” (*Gal 4:19*). *The formation of the laity in Christian life and the experience of World Meetings*.

a. Christian formation.

First of all, the Christian formation of the laity. I do not intend to go into detail on topics that will be dealt with more thoroughly in the reports; instead, I would like to emphasize the pastoral urgency of this theme. I have been reflecting on it for several years, and it is very close to my heart. Let me give you an example. At the meeting of the Heads of Dicasteries of the Roman Curia in 2022, in the presence of Pope Francis, we were asked to express our opinion on the “Working Document for the Continental Stage” (DCS). That document spoke of “formation,” emphasizing primarily formation in synodality. However, as I observed in my public speech, although this is necessary, what is particularly needed today is the “basic” formation of the lay faithful, that is, formation in the Christian life. I told my fellow cardinals and other heads of Dicasteries this; that even before synodal participation, that which is lacking today is faith! Today, in fact, we are standing witness to an alarming increase in the number of people who do not know Jesus Christ at all!

In the document mentioned above I was struck by a quote from the Spanish Episcopal Conference, that which spoke of “the formation of the heart … which

embraces the whole of life” (DTC 82). It is precisely on this point that I believe greater emphasis should be placed. At the origin of Christian life, in fact, there is an encounter with the Person of Jesus Christ, an encounter that first changes the heart of people, then changes their mentality, then converts their daily behavior, and thus their whole life.¹ This is the dynamic of faith!

Many today think that the solution to the problems of the Church is to change structures, or to change the principles of Catholic doctrine or morality. But this is a false solution. It will not be these “changes” that will bring people back to Mass, or cause vocations to flourish again, or bring young people back to the Church. In that same document, the word “evangelization” appeared only twice, and the word “catechesis” only once, but these are precisely what are greatly needed today. Every local Church, every diocese, and every single parish, should offer, on a permanent basis, courses of evangelization and catechesis, of initial proclamation of the faith (Kerigma), of Christian initiation, of formation in the faith, and of accompaniment in spiritual growth.

The Holy Father, Leo XIV, in his apostolic letter written on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Conciliar Declaration *Gravissimum Educationis*, affirmed: “Christian formation embraces the entire person: spiritual, intellectual, emotional, social, physical” (Apostolic Letter *Drawing New Maps of Hope*, 4.2). I emphasize, therefore, that by “Christian formation” we do not mean school lectures, but lively and kerygmatic catechesis, introduction to the sacramental life of the Church, liturgical celebrations, introduction to the life of prayer, examination of life in the light of the Word of God, moments of discussion and dialogue, experiences of fraternity, experiences of service and of charity, missionary experiences, etc. The model is the “formation in the faith” that Jesus gave to his disciples.

I would also like to point out that, precisely in this work of evangelization, catechesis, and formation in Christian life, there is a need for synergy among all ecclesial components: pastors, laity, families, single people, consecrated persons, lay

¹ Cf Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 1.

associations, movements, youth groups, parish structures and programs, as well as online programs and “web apostles”.

An important part of this work is Christian formation specifically aimed at families. In the daily work of the Dicastery, listening to the bishops during their *ad limina* visits, and many of our other collaborators, there emerges a great need for Christian formation for spouses and the accompaniment of families, beginning from the earliest years of marriage. In this area too, families need to be offered opportunities for formation in matrimonial spirituality, married life, family prayer, and the transmission of the faith to their children. Christian formation for families should be guided primarily by married couples who, starting from their own witness of life, know how to form, enlighten, and support couples, especially younger ones, and especially in times of crisis. We must recognize, in fact, that married couples receive little formation before marriage, and are practically without accompaniment after the celebration.

I know well that there are no simple and immediate solutions. But it is important to encourage the episcopal conferences, the dioceses, the pastors, and all the People of God, to seriously ask themselves what to do to begin a new work of Christian formation for the men and women of today. This is what we propose to do with this Plenary Assembly. Throughout history, it has often been the saints, and the movements of renewal born of them, who have initiated new “waves” of evangelization and Christian formation of the masses. Certainly, today too, we must pray that new saints will arise, who, with their zeal and creativity, will help the Church to bring many people closer to the faith. At the same time, we feel the responsibility, as a Church, to do our part, not to hold back, and to make our contribution, however small, to promoting a new impulse of evangelization, catechesis, and the formation of hearts, so that they may open to the faith and grow spiritually into the full maturity of Christian life.

In summary, on the theme of formation, what goals do we set ourselves in this Plenary? I refer here to what you may have already read in the preparatory text that was given to you.

a. First of all, we want to raise the issue. It is urgent to understand—and I would say, not only to understand, but also to feel with sorrow—that in our ecclesial environments, faith is not being generated in people. Faith is often taken for granted, it is assumed that everyone believes, but this is no longer true in our societies. Christian formation must therefore give rise to faith in people and lead them to a living relationship with God, with Christ, and to a mature Christian life lived in the Church.

b. Secondly, we want to raise awareness among the episcopal conferences. Unfortunately, in the area of Christian formation, there is a great deal of passivity in local churches. What is done is often improvised and done in a very approximate and ineffective way. In most cases, nothing is done.

c. Thirdly, we want to identify some fundamental criteria. We ask ourselves: what should Christian formation be like? What is essential? It would be useful to identify some fundamental elements, because in this way, every local church could take them into account in order to organize the Christian formation of the laity today.

d. Fourthly, we will have to evaluate whether it is appropriate to produce a document, obviously not in these three days, but later, as a result of the Plenary Assembly. In this case, we believe that it would not be a complete and structured formation program to be applied everywhere, but rather “guidelines” which indicate the fundamental criteria to be kept in mind, so that individual Episcopal Conferences of Bishops may take effective action in the area of Christian formation.

b. World Meetings.

The second theme we want to reflect on are the World Meetings. Many people know our Dicastery mainly for these events, not for anything else. Some of them now have a long history: World Youth Day has been celebrated for 40 years, and World Meeting of Families for 32 years. Others have a more recent history: in fact, the World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly has only been celebrated for 5 years.

The rapid changes taking place in our world require everyone, including us as a Church, not to remain static. Certainly, society, mentality, culture, and faith, were very different 40 or 30 years ago, when the longest-running events of this type began, in comparison to today. We cannot therefore be content to repeat what has been done in the past.

Large-scale cultural and economic globalization has taken place, social mobility and interculturalism have increased, and we have witnessed the growth of religious indifference, but, at the same time, a return to the sacred with a new need for religiosity and spirituality among the younger generations. Above all, there has been an unpredictable and overwhelming digital revolution that has completely changed lifestyles and social interactions.

The Church has also changed: it is more attentive to people's sensibilities, their cultures, and their often troubled and painful personal histories. It is a Church that is more eager to reach out to everyone, willing to walk with everyone, respecting each person's pace. It is a Church that is better prepared to evangelize and carry out its mission in a truly synodal and participatory manner. It is more attentive to the weak, and more respectful of consciences.

Here too I do not want to anticipate the detailed presentations that will be offered regarding these events in the course of the Plenary. It seems important to me only to recall the necessary pastoral wisdom and prudence which we must include in our reflection. On the one hand, we must certainly avoid the temptation of "immobilism": maintaining things as they are, because all in all they function, they

do good to those who participate, people are happy, and they are generally welcomed favourably by the media. So therefore, let's not worry too much, and let us not bother ourselves with too many questions! On the other hand, we must avoid the temptation of “palingenesis”: recreating things from scratch, as if nothing had been done. Changing everything by throwing away past experiences, and ignoring the abundant fruits that these events continue to bear in the concrete ways in which they have been lived by millions of faithful over the years.

Both of these ways of thinking are inadequate. World events certainly do not have a “sacramental” character, so there is no immutable core of “divine institution” to be maintained. And yet, at their origin, there is undoubtedly a pastoral, ecclesial intuition, that must be grasped, taken up again, and perhaps adapted and expressed in new forms. We are therefore called to understand together what to keep and what to change, what to set aside and what to improve. The goal is not simply greater “worldly success,” that is, having more impact in the media or “competing” with civil society to have larger crowds than international sporting, artistic, cultural, or political events. Rather, the goal is to think about how these events can be more effective in terms of evangelization, that is, how they can truly touch people's hearts, transmit grace, and have a lasting impact on their lives. In a word, how to make them authentic experiences of encounter with Jesus Christ.

In this light, the two themes of the Plenary are linked: World Meetings can be conceived precisely as powerful moments of “formation in Christian life,” which confirm, strengthen, and relaunch the “ordinary Christian formation” which takes place in the respective local churches.

Conclusion

We have chosen for this Plenary to give ample space to your interventions, precisely because this is a meeting of listening and sharing, in which the Dicastery

wants to “receive” a valuable contribution from the participants, rather than “give” content and guidelines to be implemented once you return home. I therefore thank you in advance for the effort you will put into “thinking” about how to effectively help the Dicastery, the Holy Father, and the whole Church in regard to the proposed themes, so that, we can serve the men, women, families, young people, and elderly, whom we wish to place at the center of our pastoral concern. I also hope that our work in the assembly and our reflections, in addition to providing valuable assistance to the Dicastery, will also enrich all of us, and foster growth in ecclesial communion.

Thank you for your attentiveness.