**Meeting of the Press officers and spokespersons**

**of the Bishops' Conferences of Europe**

Malta, 17 – 19 June 2019

***Introduction from Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco***

*Archbishop of Genoa*

*President of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences*

Most Reverend Excellency,

Dear Press Officers and Spokespersons,

I am very happy to be here with you, to be able to participate in your meeting, one of the annual events organized by the CCEE Secretariat which is becoming more and more a moment of study, discussion and planning.

A dutiful thanks to the archdiocese of Malta and to H.E. Mgr. Charles Scicluna for the welcome in this splendid land and the preparation of the conference, as well as to H.E. Mgr. Joseph Galea-Curmi, auxiliary bishop of Malta, for his presence and initial greeting.

I wish to express, in my own name and that of all the European Bishops, recognition and gratitude to you, the press officers and spokespersons, for the delicate service you carry out daily with passion and professionalism for the Church in Europe.

Competently managing relations with journalists, preparing and conducting press conferences, preparing daily press reviews, are just some of the tasks of your office; a work that is often silent, often tiring but always appreciated. It is also one which is configured as a service to the ecclesial community, and in particular to bishops and pastoral offices, and which allows us to have “a useful support to know the reality represented and commented on daily by our fellow people; to have thematic press reviews, information and opinions; to examine particular situations and identify the attitude to be taken, and the interventions to be made, towards the media "(CEI, Social Communications Directory, n.192). Not only this, but also to deal with any problematic or crisis situations in the most appropriate way that they should be dealt with.

**The current social and cultural context**
We are increasingly aware of the fundamental role that communication plays in people's lives and in the society. From the Council to the present, the Church has become even more aware of how important it is to combine all the areas of ecclesial life with this new cultural and social reality. But which communications today?

Communication has become central to any production process. The media product replaced the symbolic merchandise which, until the mid-twentieth century, was produced through frames and assembly lines and was essentially material merchandise.

Technological progress and the advent of digital, in the sense of numerical sequence and use of the finger to request and obtain information, have led to an evolution of the very concept of communication, with a fundamental role conquered by images, and consequently, to the introduction on the market of mostly portable new devices (mobile phones and tablets), which allow people to enter into a reciprocal relationship to compare themselves and to interact.

At the same time, they have changed the way we live and relate to others and to the world: time has definitely expanded. We live in an eternal present (I can enjoy news, a photo or a message whenever I want); and the space has been drastically shortened or cancelled (let's see and know in real time what happens on the other side of the world). These new forms of media foster immediate, instantaneous communication which however, eliminates the time for reflection and the emotional detachment allowed by the traditional media. Being among the first to like a photo or a sentence, to share a news story or a story, the desire to be immediately present in the communication that is taking place all has the upper hand over deep thinking and the search for truth.

Postmodernism marks an era in which the images and the visualization of things that are not necessarily visual have undergone such drastic acceleration that the global circulation of the image has become an end in itself, taking place at great speed in the Web. This extraordinary proliferation of images has caused a real informational and visual overload.

Our life takes place on the screen; human experience is now more visual and visualised than it has ever been in the past. The data says that our life takes place mainly on the Net but we are not connected to reality: more and more we are connected to the world of the network and more and more alone in reality. The tablet has become the "media nanny"; our youth begin and end the first romantic relationships on the net and not in person; young people and adults no longer speak, they chat; not to mention the fashion of the Selfie. Again, the unbridled use of video games and the ease of access to violent and pornographic content, up to the media pillory that has tragic consequences in reality like the many cases of suicide which unfortunately they remind us of.

The new media "has penetrated our lives so pervasively that they now seem like the real "environment " In which we live. If yesterday the media reproduced somehow a pre-existing reality, today they produce reality in the very act of representing it; they do not merely transmit information, but shape our own experience of reality, that is, they are real builders of social reality " (*S. BELARDINELLI, How to rethink the truth, 2018*).

Moreover, it should be noted that "web and social media eliminate any mediation and render the filters, controls, professional and ethical rules of traditional publishing systems ineffective". The networks then greatly amplify the possibility of fake news. A phenomenon, that of fake news, "emphasized by the progressive loss of confidence in the systems that were delegated to "administer" scientific knowledge and to say the definitive word with respect to what is true or false. In a context where everyone talks about everything, the emotional dimension that pertains to a fact exceeds the same factual dimension in importance" (*Appeal-manifesto of the Digital Transformation Institute to address the issue of fake news, IL FOGLIO, December 5, 2017*).

What about the presence of the Church then in the new digital scenario?

"The Church would feel guilty before her Lord if she did not use these powerful means, which human intelligence makes more perfect every day. By using them the Church "preaches on the roofs" the message of which it is the depositary; in them it finds a modern and effective version of the pulpit. Thanks to them She is able to speak to the multitudes, "wrote St. Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (n. 45).

A first commitment to which we are called, as people and as Christians: it is not enough to "intelligently" use the media of the network, but it is also necessary to "re-found them", making them return to being instruments of true relationship.

It is appropriate to overcome the idea of ​​using media as simple speakers, as if speaking aloud leads us to be more persuasive, or use them as scepters, as if wielding them as a sign of power gives us more strength. In the current media context there is no need to impose oneself. Rather, we need to expose ourselves: offering ourselves and our listening skills. (*see F. CASETTI, Digital Witnesses, 2010*).

It is necessary to live as protagonists; to know the languages ​​and risks of the network, to give reasons but above all, to be a credible source that makes transparency and service to the Truth always and in any case one's lifestyle and way of operating in the world, even the digital one.

**Crisis situations**

A service to the Truth is to communicate transparently by offering at the same time, timely and documented information on the Church's thoughts and multiple initiatives. It is the first step to help public opinion make an objective judgment on the life of the Church, especially in crisis situations such as scandals of a sexual nature or linked to economic events, or like the current and painful one for the Church caused by the abuse of minors by priests or religious.

In the speech at the end of the meeting on "The protection of minors in the Church", this was how Pope Francis expressed himself: "in the Church at present the awareness has grown of having to not only try to stem the very serious abuses with disciplinary measures and civil and canonical processes, but also to deal decisively with the phenomenon both inside and outside the Church. She feels called to fight this evil that touches the centre of her mission: to announce the Gospel to the little ones and protect them from voracious wolves.

The objective of the Church will therefore be to listen, defend, protect and treat the abused, exploited and forgotten children, wherever they are. In order to achieve this aim the Church must rise above all ideological polemics and journalistic policies that often exploit, for various interests, these same dramas experienced by children ".

Every case of abuse is to be considered a crime and a monstrosity. Every time a case of pedophilia is ascertained, pain and closeness to the victims and family members are renewed in us; together we reaffirm the condemnation of the guilty, while the concern for the scandal of souls grows.

It is also a duty to reaffirm that these shadows, which at times are painfully evident, must not obscure or discredit the clear and generous work of many operators, priests, consecrated and lay people, who serve with gratuity and sacrifice of energy, time and money.

"Our Lord Jesus Christ calls every believer to be a shining example of virtue, integrity and holiness.” - writes Pope Francis in the Apostolic Letter *Vos estis Lux Mundi* - All of us in fact, are called to give concrete witness of faith in Christ in our lives and, in particular, in our relationships with others.

Sexual abuse crimes offend our Lord, cause physical, psychological and spiritual harm to the victims and harm the community of the faithful. In order for these phenomena, in all their forms, to stop occurring, a continuous and profound conversion of hearts is needed as well as being attested by concrete and effective actions that involve everyone in the Church so that personal sanctity and moral commitment can contribute to promoting the full credibility of the Gospel proclamation and the effectiveness of the Church's mission".

Situations, those of crisis, must also be managed at the media level. What preventions and preparations are needed to face the difficult situations in which, as a Church, we can find ourselves? My thanks to Prof. Yago de la Cierva for the work he has been doing for years in this delicate area and for having agreed to help us understand which strategies and actions to take.