
Videoconference, 25 September 2020

**Council of Catholic Bishops' Conferences of Europe
PLENARY ASSEMBLY**

“The Church in Europe after the Pandemic. Perspectives for Creation and Community”

Introduction

*Card. Angelo Bagnasco
CCEE President*

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

On my personal behalf and on behalf of the Presidency, I extend a cordial greeting to all the participants of the Plenary Assembly of the Council of Catholic Bishops' Conferences of Europe, whose theme for this year is, "The Church in Europe after the Pandemic. Perspectives for Creation and Community", and in particular to our Brother Msgr. Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, Archbishop of Minsk, expressing our deepest solidarity and hoping for a prompt return to the pastoral mission in his Church. I would also like to thank the Czech Catholic Bishops' Conference and its President, H.E. Archbishop Jan Graubner, as well as H.Em. Card. Dominik Duka, for the kind invitation to hold this meeting in the Archdiocese of Prague. Unfortunately, the pandemic did not allow this common desire to happen, despite the great work of our General Secretariat, which I thank from the bottom of my heart. We will therefore participate through uncommon ways: I am sure that everyone's contribution will, as always, be marked by our passion for Christ and for our Continent.

1. Working during Covid-19

Over the past few months, when everything seemed to be at a standstill and life was on hold, the Presidency has often met via videoconference, once also with the Presidency of COMECE to discuss the Social Weeks, as well as with the Presidents of our four Commissions. We also worked in view of the Catholic-Orthodox Forum which was scheduled for next November in Greece and will take place in June instead. In addition, the new SECAM Presidency has asked for a meeting in Rome, and there will soon be a preliminary meeting online. We have maintained a constant exchange of information with our Brothers, especially regarding the necessary updating of the Plenary Assembly agenda. The first draft by the Presidency, in fact, dates back to 2 December 2019, focusing on the encyclical *Laudato si'* five years after its publication. The growing emergency, though, suggested that we should focus our efforts on the phenomenon that has hit the whole world, in order to be able to understand it better, to identify ways of ecclesial collaboration that might be of help and encouragement to the whole of society, and to offer a sign of communion and hope for the entire continent. At the end of the Plenary, as always, a Message to Europe will be agreed upon, which will recall the reasons for trust despite widespread anxiety and encourage people to walk together in the light of God. In addition, it will invite everyone - individuals, communities, and nations - not to withdraw into themselves in an illusory search for defence, but to seek instead to strengthen personal relationships and international relations.

2. The guide of the Holy Father Francis

In the short and intense work of these hours, we are comforted, as always, by the Holy Father's Message: we thank him warmly and pray for him. I want to thank him also for the passionate support of the agenda that we are currently addressing, and which I had the opportunity to illustrate to him at the Audience he granted me on Saturday, 6 June last - sadly by myself this year rather than with the whole Presidency. His encouragement and invitation to carry on together was a conviction shared by all of us, so we are absolutely ready and willing. We are also grateful to him because he assured us of his presence at the Assembly in Rome in 2021, when we will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the birth of CCEE, and we anticipate our gratitude for the forthcoming Encyclical on Human Fraternity, all the more necessary in times of easy self-promotion and closure.

To H.Em. Card. Marc Ouellet we express our fraternal and respectful greetings, because he keeps following us with great affection and care under all circumstances, bearing the echo of the Apostolic See and the confirmation from Peter. A cordial greeting to Msgr. Marco Ganci, who replaced H.Ex. Msgr. Paolo Rudelli as Observer of the Holy See to the Council of Europe: the CCEE looks with particular interest at his work.

In conclusion, as acknowledged by the words of the Holy Father, we reviewed the agenda and prepared a preliminary grid that we sent to all of you on 14 July this year.

3. The victims and the world of solidarity

Dear Brothers, our praying thoughts go out to the many victims of the epidemic, to those who have experienced their final passing without the presence of their loved ones. We express our appreciation to the countless people - doctors, nurses, law enforcement authorities, providers of basic services, volunteers, priests, and men and women religious - who have made us feel through prayer, speech, looks, and gestures that a truly human society does not abandon anyone, and that caring for people calls for appropriate therapies, but cannot do without love and human and religious warmth. Our thoughts extend even further: we would like our communities, our peoples, our States, and Europe, to feel that we are neighbours, pastors, and friends. But, let us say this: at this moment, our heart would like to reach out to the whole world, and to approach humankind - like the Samaritan woman of the Gospel - marked by the invisible scourge, thirsting for the living water that is Jesus. For all of us we will keep on praying, and bring every possible sign of Christ's grace. Together with every righteous person of good will, we hope that the social and religious life, as well as the labour market and the economy, and nations, will get back to being truer, wiser, and more powerful.

4. Christ, Light of all people

Against this background, in the light of the Spirit of the Risen One, we begin to work to discern how Christ, "light of all people", can shine ever more brightly on the face of the Church, being aware that the Gospel has generated civilization, culture, and beauty for two thousand years now. That in the Incarnate Word the face of God-Love and, consequently, the face of human dignity is fully manifested. We believe - as Pope Francis says - in a Europe that is a family in solidarity, subsidiarity, and respect for different peoples, knowing that the Gospel keeps on being an inexhaustible contribution to build an earthly *Civitas* that is not withdrawn and imploding, but open beyond itself, with its feet on earth and its gaze in Heaven. The religious dimension of the human being, in fact, is not a cultural addition or a form of social conditioning, or a psychological projection, or an escape from responsibility, but a structural human dimension. Universal experience, in fact, testifies that in every time and place humans tend to go beyond themselves, towards a "place" that they perceive as "beyond" but never as alien. History confirms that humankind has always wondered not only about "how" things work, but also about "why" things work. For this reason, to believe that religion is a purely private matter to be confined to the margins of coexistence would be an intellectual error, or a sad form of secularism without laicity.

5. The European dream

Europe is not primarily an organisation, but - we could say - a living "entelechy", i.e. a working spirit, a purpose not superimposed but intrinsic to its own reality. The Gospel marks not only its coming to light, but its very conception; it is the principle that specifies and unifies, that enhances and summarises every genuine contribution. This origin carries with it the seal of universality, which can never be predominance but service to the people.

Against this background and with these sentiments, imbued with the worries and hopes that dwell in our hearts, we set to work certain of the gentle light of the Spirit of the Risen One and of the Holy Virgin who, as the Great Mother of God, watches over our Communities and over Europe. We hope that every human being will find "that God, from whom to turn is to fall, to whom to turn is to rise, in whom to abide is to stand, unto whom to return is to revive, to whom to dwell is to live" (St Augustine, *Soliloquies*). Thank you!