

Authenticity of the Church and credibility in Her Mission  
starting from the Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*

**Authenticity of the Church in *ad intra* relations**

**48th Annual Meeting of the General Secretaries of the Bishops' Conferences**

*Online*, 1-2 July 2021

Cordial greetings to you, Excellencies, to the General Secretary of CCEE, to all the General Secretaries as well as to all the participants present at this meeting.

I thank you for the opportunity to speak on the theme of our annual *online* meeting, namely, the authenticity and credibility of the Church based on Pope Paul VI's Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* with an emphasis on *ad intra* dialogue. I will be happy to share with you some reflections in the spirit of the above-mentioned Encyclical and based on my participation in numerous events organised by the Council of European Bishops' Conferences and my long-standing collaboration with the CCEE Secretariat.

The encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* was published on 6 August 1964, the Feast of the Transfiguration. Although more than half a century has passed since then, it is still very relevant today. I have been asked to speak as the Secretary with, at present, the longest mandate. The Bishops of the Bishops' Conference of Bosnia and Herzegovina entrusted me with the office of General Secretary in June 2004. Thus, next year, God willing and if the bishops agree, I will become an "adult" General Secretary. The fact that I have been serving for so long is a clear indication that the members of the Bishops' Conference are good and patient, as are others with whom I work.

**Thanks to the CCEE**

First of all, I would like to point out that my priestly life and my work as General Secretary would be much poorer if there were no Council of European Bishops' Conferences. Thanks to the work of the CCEE, I had the opportunity, as secretary of a small Bishops' Conference, to visit most of the European countries and to get to know the life of the Church within them. From the experience of the war, which we lived from 1992 to 1995 in Bosnia-Herzegovina and especially in the capital Sarajevo, I am well aware how much more meaningful it often is to see someone or something in person rather than reading about it a hundred times. A personal meeting or encounter is irreplaceable. Therefore, I believe I speak for all of us who carry out this ministry when I say: I sincerely thank the founders, those at the helm and the CCEE Secretariat for organising so many beautiful and blessed ecclesial gatherings throughout Europe. For me, every meeting, with no exceptions, has been really good and enriching. I have felt welcomed everywhere. May the Lord grant eternal peace to all those in CCEE who have been called to eternity, and may he bless all those who have made a contribution in this field or are serving today in this precious institution of the Church in Europe. I could define these meetings as a true intra-ecclesial dialogue. They have helped me to know and love the Catholic Church and my mission in it even more.

## **Called to holiness in the Church**

In point 25 of the encyclical, Pope Paul VI writes: “The Church needs to reflect upon itself and to become aware of its own extraordinary vitality. It must strive to gain a fuller understanding of itself if it is to do what it has to do and bring to the world the message of salvation and brotherly love. To use St. Paul's phrase, it must experience the indwelling presence of Christ: *"May Christ find a dwelling place through faith in your hearts."* (Eph. 3:17) I am convinced that in every country there is a saying that, more or less states: "If you do not know what is good, buy what is expensive". Yet, the most precious things cannot be bought or paid for. They can only be obtained free of charge from life, from the love of parents and from the many good people we meet in our existence and is, in fact, connected not only to human love but is a foretaste of divine love. The immense gift of Christ's Love is the Church. It is a great grace to be able to be Her members. The gift of the Church is priceless and irreplaceable because it came from the side of Christ on the cross. In it and for it, each member personally and as a community encounters Jesus Christ, encounters his brothers and sisters in faith. A sure sign that I love the Church is that I do my best to walk in the way of Jesus Christ, that is, in the way of holiness. The saints, throughout history, have been a priceless gift to the Church. The saints are the realisation of the Church in daily life and the most beautiful face of the Church in the world and will be so until the end of the world. Through dialogue with God, they have found a way to dialogue in the Church and in the world and to fulfil the mission entrusted to them by Christ.

## **Growing up in the school of Faith and the Divine Word**

“It is through faith that we gain this awareness of the mystery of the Church-mature faith, a faith lived out in our lives. Faith such as this gives us a *sensus Ecclesiae*, an awareness of the Church, and this is something with which the genuine Christian should be deeply imbued. He has been raised in the school of the divine word, nourished by the grace of the sacraments and the Paraclete's heavenly inspiration, trained in the practice of the virtues of the Gospel, and influenced by the Church's culture and community life. He has, moreover, the tremendous joy of sharing in the dignity of the royal priesthood granted to the people of God. (Cf *1 Pt 2:9*.)” writes the Holy Father in point 36 of the aforementioned Encyclical and immediately adds in point 37 that, “The mystery of the Church is not a truth to be confined to the realms of speculative theology. It must be lived”.

A member of our Bishops' Conference of Bosnia and Herzegovina, an eminent connoisseur of the Church Fathers, once said that at the beginning of the Church, and even afterwards, the greatest theologians were at the same time the greatest saints. He also gave the impression that the same cannot be said for the recent history of the Church, namely that the great theologians are at the same time the great saints. Science is extraordinarily important and is one of the ‘gifts’ of the Holy Spirit. We, who live in countries where the communist regime ruled for decades, are often surprised and sometimes a little angry when we read the criticism of certain church documents by some Catholic theologians in Western countries. Of course, what these theologians write also reflects on the faithful. Twenty years ago, during my holidays, I was filling in for a pastor in a German city. After the evening Mass, I was approached by a member of the faithful who was visibly dissatisfied with something the then Pope had written in a document published at that time. I was rather surprised. I am convinced that this was not his conclusion based on reading the document, but the result of what was written in the media, to which some Catholic theologians also contributed. A professor from Sarajevo, who studied in Innsbruck, once said that we in the countries of the former

communist system accept all ecclesiastical documents without discussion and with total openness, perhaps because we do not make an effort to know them well. I am convinced that, on the other hand, it is necessary to approach the teachings of the Church with a great deal of humility, clarity and love, so as not to induce the members of the Church into unnecessary doubts.

### **Conversion begins on the knees**

Science is acquired mainly by sitting, whereas holiness is acquired mainly on the knees. The initiation of all conversion begins on the knees. Every Holy Mass begins with an invitation to the confession of sins. It is not unusual that in many modern churches there is no kneeling at all, only sitting. Isn't it unusual that in many churches there is no possibility for the believer to access the Sacrament of Confession - not a conversation, but a Sacrament that is the merciful encounter of a contrite sinner and a merciful Father? And theology, in addition to the cathedra, must also be taught on the knees because it is the encounter of a man in need of God's love and forgiveness with a God who loves man so much that he sends him His Son, his Word. How can that Word be understood and taught to others without encountering it, without deep humility and awareness of one's own smallness, without sincere prayer and without an encounter with the Word in the mystery of the Eucharist? I am convinced that a good number of theologians in rich countries can learn this from those who have suffered or are suffering because of their faith. Through suffering, they have experienced the greatness and power of the Word of God. They know from experience that disputes between individual theologians are often more humane reasoning and that learning from and about the Word of God should be a help in living daily life.

### **Blessed meetings of the Church in Europe**

Pope Paul VI in his Encyclical (no. 59) recalls the words of St Paul: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be reformed in the newness of your mind, that you may prove what is the good and the acceptable and the perfect will of God" (Rom 12:2). As a priest, I am particularly pleased that all the meetings organised by CCEE are permeated with Eucharistic celebrations, homilies and the liturgy of the hours. Every time the Church prays, it trusts in God's help and grows in communion. I take this opportunity to thank CCEE for giving the opportunity to the "small" Churches to show their beautiful faces to brothers and sisters from other countries. I am pleased that some important events organised by CCEE took place in Sarajevo. I believe I also share the opinion of colleagues from other countries. All these meetings are blessed opportunities to learn how to carry out our mission in different situations of life and society; to learn from each other and help each other to be able, in all of life's circumstances, to find the best way to proclaim the Gospel of Christ and also to bear witness to the living Christ.

### **Learning from each other**

I express my gratitude to the Churches of the rich countries for the good they do for many Churches in the world, including my own country, Bosnia and Herzegovina. This was particularly evident during the war in this area, but also afterwards until the present day. There is indeed a great openness on the part of both the Church and the people in these countries to share with the poor and the less numerous much of what they have gained and what they have now. Without this kind of support from many Catholics in Western countries, it would be difficult to reorganise the many local Churches that survived under Ottoman rule or the communist system. Furthermore, much good can be learned from the Church in

developed countries. Time and again I admire the respectful way in which Church representatives in the richer countries approach the faithful and the people in general. At the same time, the Church in Western countries is experiencing the fascination offered by the world of material prosperity at almost every level. The impression is that there are more and more material standards and measures of the exclusively human spirit, so there seems to be very little room for the action of the Holy Spirit. Pope Paul VI in the above-mentioned encyclical (no. 42) writes: "As we know, the Church does not exist in isolation from the world. It lives in the world, and its members are consequently influenced and guided by the world. They imbibe its culture, are subject to its laws and adopt its customs. This intimate contact with the world is continually creating problems for the Church and at the present time these problems are extremely acute. The Christian life, as encouraged and preserved by the Church, must resist every possible source of deception, contamination, or restriction of its freedom. It must guard against these things as it would guard against contamination by error or evil. Yet at the same time it must not only adapt itself to the forms of thought and living which a temporal environment induces, one might almost say imposes on it-provided, of course, such forms are not incompatible with the basic principles of its religious and moral teaching-but it must also strive to approach these forms and to correct, ennoble, encourage, and sanctify them. And this demands of the Church a continual process of self-examination and re-appraisal of its external conduct", said this Holy Pope. When a man walks in a dark room, he walks slowly and takes small steps and only leans full weight when he feels the ground is firm. I think the same should be done with the dangers of this world. When it comes to religious and moral science, it is necessary to take small and sure steps so that what is profane in the world does not contaminate the Church, and rather that it is the Church that permeates the world with its evangelical mission. Whenever the Church allowed itself to be permeated by profane measures, it always bore serious consequences, even decades later, even though at first it might have seemed useful and even good.

### **Making sense of the life of the Church in different circumstances**

In the post-war period, many Church representatives came to Bosnia and Herzegovina with a very open spirit and a desire for the Churches to enrich each other. This often bore very good fruit. However, good results were lacking, especially when one wanted to transfer the criteria from one's own country to a country with a different organisation, tradition, culture, population composition, etc. It seems to me that the greatest misunderstandings have arisen in the area of ecumenism and dialogue because of a lack of sensitivity to those who live a certain reality. I am convinced that much more dialogue within the Church is needed in this area. My impression is that it is much easier to come to a certain country, i.e. in a Church, and show a "wide heart" to those who are more numerous and stronger, than to unite with brothers and sisters in the faith who are weaker in the same country. It seems quite natural to me that a stronger brother or sister should stand beside a weaker brother or sister. It also seems to me quite Christian not to do this *against* someone but rather *for* someone who belongs to the same Church. Many have clearly been at our side, both in Bosnia and Herzegovina and throughout the world, and I thank them from the bottom of my heart. Among them, is the CCEE.

I see the work and mission of the CCEE in the blessed opportunity that local Churches in different countries have to learn from each other. Pastors, who lived and worked in very difficult conditions during the reign of communism, can learn much from pastors in more developed countries in terms of organisation, work, order and true respect for every believer, and indeed, every person. On the other hand, the shepherds of the Western countries could

learn that they were sent to be shepherds. And the shepherd neither goes with the sheep nor follows them, but instead, goes before them and finds their pasture (cfr Jn 10,4).

The European Football Championship is going on now. The players have their roles and only play as a team if the coach does his job well. The players have their mission, and the coach has his. This is the case even in the most democratic countries. Can a professor fulfil his mission by becoming one of the students so that everyone can democratically determine what he should teach and what he should not? Not to mention the management of trains, planes... when it comes to the safety of human lives. The pastor has his own irreplaceable role and mission which he has not given himself. The pastor has been chosen by the heavenly Shepherd to act in His Name and Spirit and to preach His word. The pastor is sent to preach and the faithful have the right to listen to the pastor. The pastor has no right in the name of democracy or alleged humility to shirk his task, because it has been entrusted to him by the Church in the name of Christ. The spirit of the world always wants to strike the pastor first, no matter what the spirit of the world was and what methods it used. Despite all human weaknesses and limitations, pastors are called and sent to carry out their mission. The pastor should be humble; he must always have an open ear to listen to others, especially the faithful entrusted to his care. Yet, he must remain a pastor so as not to betray his mission. The faithful need pastors as shepherds, proclaimers of God's Word, sharers in the sacred mysteries and witnesses of God's love in the world.

### **The church lives and works in changing social systems**

Those who promoted the communist regime were convinced that it was the fairest and certainly the last system and that no one else could come after it. And those of us who grew up in such a system had the impression that it would indeed last a very long time. And then, suddenly, everything collapsed. As it has been with other systems throughout history, so it is now and will be in the future. The taste for power is seductive and often poisonous. The Church has been tempted in every time and in every system to taste at least a little of that power. And every time that it has accepted it, there have been serious consequences, even if they came decades later. Just as there was not, and will not, be a world without pain, suffering and death, so there will be no Church without a cross. There are many parts of the world where Christians suffer for the sake of the cross, are proud of the cross and do not give up. Where we see disappointments “circulating within the Church itself”, as the aforementioned encyclical states (no. 27), the symbol of the cross is increasingly lost and replaced by various other earthly symbols. The Church is sent to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to proclaim the Gospel of Christ using all good ways in the time in which She lives, but never to renounce Her mission. At no time and in no part of the world can the Church renounce the Cross, the clear teaching of the Gospel and Her mission; she cannot renounce Christ in any way. A man grows up and from a small child becomes a young man or woman, and then a mature person until the days of old age. Always the same person, but at the same time almost unrecognisable in comparison with childhood, adulthood and old age. Clothes are always similar, yet so different in size and appearance, suitable for every age. I think that we too, as members of the Church, are called to clothe the Gospel with the clothes of the times, but without ever betraying its essence.

### **Intra-ecclesial conversation "sincere and imbued with original holiness"**

It seems to be a permanent temptation for every human being to be independent of someone or something, and this is often set up as the ideal. Following this desire, man strives to acquire more and more and to depend as little as possible on others. In doing so, he closes himself off

more and more and becomes more and more alone. Less and less he needs the help of, and cooperation with, others; especially with those who have less. He needs God and man less and less and has the impression of being self-sufficient. He opens himself more and more to worldly enjoyment and closes himself more and more to earthly life and eternal life, convinced of his own power and wisdom. In the aforementioned Encyclical, no. 115, the Holy Father writes: “a spirit of independence, bitter criticism, defiance, and arrogance is far removed from that charity which nourishes and preserves the spirit of fellowship, harmony, and peace in the Church. It completely vitiates dialogue, turning it into argument, disagreement and dissension—a sad state of affairs, but by no means uncommon. St. Paul warned us against this when he said: *“Let there be no schisms among you.” (1Cor 1:10)*”. Pope Paul VI wants the discourse within the Church to be a “frequent occurrence and on an intimate level. May it be open and responsive to all truth, every virtue, every spiritual value that goes to make us the heritage of Christian teaching. We want it to be sincere. We want it to be an inspiration to genuine holiness. We want it to show itself ready to listen to the variety of views which are expressed in the world today. We want it to be the sort of dialogue that will make Catholics virtuous, wise, unfettered, fair-minded and strong” (no. 113).

I want this conversation of ours, which we hold at a distance, and every conversation within the Church to be exactly like that. I thank everyone for their attention and patience.

*Msgr Ivo Tomašević*

*General Secretary of the Bishops' Conference of Bosnia and Herzegovina*