

Videoconference, 27-28 October 2022
Council of the European Bishops' Conferences
PLENARY ASSEMBLY

“The Church in Europe on the synodal path”

Introduction

H.E. Msgr. Gintaras Grušas
Archbishop of Vilnius and CCEE President

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

On my own behalf and on behalf of the Presidency, I extend cordial greetings to all participants at the Plenary Assembly of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences entitled: ***“The Church in Europe on the Synodal Path”***.

As we decided in last year's Plenary Assembly, we are meeting online in electronic mode, and in a brief way (only two days), because we want to give ample space to the continental Synodal Assembly that will see us gather, together with many brothers and sisters from all over Europe, next February in Prague. It will be an opportunity to listen to the Holy Spirit and reflect together on the synodal path that we have already started in our Bishops' Conferences as well as on what will be proposed to us in the Document for the Continental Stage.

We begin our meeting by welcoming **H.Em. Card. Marc OUELLET**, *Prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops*, whom we thank for the affection and interest with which he always accompanies our work. Thanks to **H.Em. Card. Mario GRECH**, *Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops*, and to **H.Em. Card. Jean-Claude HOLLERICH**, *General Rapporteur of the Synod of Bishops*, for their presence and because they agreed, with their interventions, to accompany us in our reflections on the synod. A cordial greeting and welcome also to **Msgr. Marco GANCI**, *Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg*.

This year, seven of our brethren ended their service as Presidents of Bishops' Conferences, and consequently, their mandate as members of the CCEE. We thank them for their friendship, their commitment and for sharing a stretch of road with us. And we also welcome the new Presidents:

- H.E. Msgr. Tomo VUKŠIĆ, new president for Bosnia & Herzegovina, successor of H.Em. Card. Vinko PULJIĆ.
- H.E. Msgr. Dražen KUTLEŠA, new president for Croatia, successor of H.E. Msgr. Želimir PULJIĆ.
- H.E. Msgr. Petros STEFÁNOU, new president for Greece, successor of H.E. Msgr. Sevastianos ROSSOLATOS.
- H.Em. Card. Matteo ZUPPI, new president for Italy, successor of H.Em. Card. Gualtiero BASSETTI.
- H.B. Card. Lucian MUREȘAN, new president for Romania, successor of H.E. Msgr. Aurel PERCĂ.

- H.E. Msgr. Andrej SAJE, new president for Slovenia, successor of H.E. Msgr. Stanislav ZORE.
- H.E. Msgr. Bernard BOBER, new president for Slovakia, successor of H.E. Msgr. Stanislav ZVOLENSKÝ.

I add a fond memorial, which becomes a prayer, for two of our friends who have concluded their earthly pilgrimage: **H. E. Msgr. Aldo Giordano**, Apostolic Nuncio to the European Union, who was the CCEE General Secretary for 13 years, and **H.E. Msgr. Ivo Fürer**, Bishop Emeritus of St. Gallen, the CCEE General Secretary from 1977 to 1995.

At this difficult time for the whole of Europe, our hearts go out to Ukraine: we call on the leaders of nations to stop the war; we say “enough” to all this suffering and the spiral of violence, destruction and death to which the Ukrainian people are being subjected.

Together with Pope Francis we ask for peace. We make our own his words pronounced at the International Meeting promoted by the Community of Sant'Egidio in the “Spirit of Assisi” on the theme “The Cry for Peace. Religions and Cultures in Dialogue”: “the invocation of peace cannot be suppressed: it rises from the hearts of mothers, it is written on the faces of refugees, fleeing families, the wounded, and the dying. And this silent cry rises to Heaven... it has the sacrosanct right to *ask for peace* in the name of the suffering that has been endured and deserves to be heard. It deserves that everyone, starting with the rulers, bend down to listen with seriousness and respect. The cry of peace expresses the pain and horror of war, the mother of all poverty”.

I thank in advance **H. E. Msgr. Visvaldas KULBOKAS**, *Apostolic Nuncio to Ukraine*, for his presence and for the updates on the situation in Ukraine.

While we renew our closeness and affection to our Ukrainian brother bishops present here, we urge our communities to continue to pray and work for peace, to be a concrete example of charity, rediscovering ourselves as *fratelli tutti*.

From 17 to 20 March this year, the third edition of the European Catholic Social Days took place in Bratislava, entitled: “*Europe beyond the pandemic: a new beginning*”. The meeting, organised together with COMECE and the Slovak Bishops' Conference, was attended by over 300 delegates: Church representatives, EU and national politicians, academics, young people as well as members of Catholic social movements and organisations. Some of the issues that we consider fundamental for a just social, economic and ecclesial recovery were addressed during the proceedings: the urgency to invest in the family and the defence of human life. The necessity to take care of the younger generations, protagonists of the restart; to take care of the most fragile social realities, the poor and the migrants, so that a dignified life is offered to all. Taking care of the environment around us, starting with a deep ecological conversion to which Pope Francis calls us to in *Laudato Si'*.

Last November I had the opportunity to participate in the online church assembly organised by CELAM; in July, together with the CCEE General Secretary, Fr Martin, I visited Accra, Ghana, for the SECAM annual assembly; this month I was in Bangkok for the FABC assembly, just as their presidents or delegates attended our assembly in Rome. Collaboration with other continental episcopal bodies is a valuable opportunity to exchange experiences and strengthen communion between the world's bishops engaged in the ecclesial mission entrusted to them.

Also worth highlighting are the ongoing exchanges with the CEC (Conference of European Churches) and the annual meeting of the CCEE-CEC Joint Committee. We met in Bratislava, on the fringe of the Social Days, to reaffirm our commitment to peace in Ukraine and to start thinking about some updates to the Ecumenical Charta, twenty years after its signing. With this in mind, we

have set up a joint working group to study the document and come up with any useful changes or additions to update the text. In view of the 25th anniversary of the Ecumenical Charta, and some 20 years after the last European Ecumenical Assembly, we would like to organise a new European Ecumenical Assembly to be held in 2026. Tomorrow, in accordance with the CCEE statutes, I will ask you to approve this request.

Recently, on 11 October, we celebrated the 60th anniversary of the start of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. In the homily during Mass for this anniversary, **Pope Francis** invited us to “rediscover the Council in order to restore primacy to God, to what is essential”. He reminded us that it led the Church “to return to the sources of her first love, to rediscover God’s holiness in her own poverty”. Finally, he asked God to “free us from the presumption of self-sufficiency”, to “lead us out of the fences of self-referentiality”, and to “free us from the diabolical artifice of polarisations, of ‘isms’”. I believe these are valuable indications for the synod we are currently experiencing and for the continental stage.

One of the first fruits of the Council was the meeting of bishops from all over Europe, who told each other about their initiatives and began to think that there was a need to meet more often and to do this continuously.

The then Secretary General of the French Bishops’ Conference, **Msgr. Roger Etchegaray**, had a prophetic intuition: in a note dated 4 November 1965, he highlighted the multiplicity of exchanges that were taking place in Europe and emphasised the need, which had emerged from conversations, to seek pastoral cooperation between the Bishops’ Conferences of Europe. This note gave rise to a series of meetings that led, in 1971, to St Paul VI establishing our Council, the CCEE.

With the sending of the syntheses by the Bishops’ Conferences, after consultation with the People of God in the particular Churches, the first phase of the synodal process has come to an end and the Continental Stage opens before us.

This Stage, the General Secretariat of the Synod reminds us, is “a time of listening and discernment for the entire People of God and all the local Churches on a continental basis. This does not mean replicating the consultation, listening and discernment that has already taken place. Rather, it is a deepening of that discernment process by persons identified to represent the local Churches”. The aim of the Continental Stage is “to more accurately formulate open questions, to better substantiate and deepen the insights coming from the local churches, now from a continental perspective”. In this, we will be helped by the Document for the Continental Stage (DTC), the result of “careful reflection on the syntheses of all the Bishops’ Conferences, as well as the Eastern Churches, and realities such as religious institutes and lay movements” (*FAQ Continental Stage*).

The European Continental Synodal Assembly will take place in Prague from 5 to 12 February 2023. We thank **H.E. Msgr. Jan GRAUBNER**, *Archbishop of Prague*, and the Czech Bishops’ Conference, for their welcome and willingness to prepare the event together with our Secretariat. It will be a Church Assembly attended by about 200 people. Of these, 156 will be delegates of the Bishops’ Conferences: each national delegation will consist of the President of the Bishops’ Conference along with three other delegates. 44 guests will be invited directly by the CCEE Presidency, as participants of the most representative ecclesial realities at the European level. A first invitation with directions has already been sent to you all.

The last two days, from 10 to 12 February, we will meet only the Presidents of the Bishops’ Conferences, as indicated by the *Methodological Note on Continental Assemblies*: “the bishops are invited to have their own specific time to meet, at the end of the Continental Assemblies, to collegially re-examine the synodal experience lived from their specific charisma and role”.

Pope Francis, in his speech at the beginning of the synodal journey (9 October 2021), exhorted us to “experience this moment of encounter, listening and reflection as a season of grace... that, in the

joy of the Gospel, allows us to recognize at least three opportunities”. A “synodal Church, an open square where all can feel at home and participate”. A “listening Church: to “listen to the Spirit in adoration and prayer” and to “listen to our brothers and sisters”. A “Church of closeness: God’s own ‘style’, which is closeness, compassion and tender love”. We are aware that this synod is a time inhabited by the Spirit. We want to walk together “in order to experience a Church that receives and lives this gift of unity and is open to the voice of the Spirit”.

During tomorrow's session, we will be called upon to elect the new presidents of the CCEE Commissions. We thank the bishops who, with this assembly, conclude their five-year term for their service. Thanks go to **Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich**, President of the Youth Commission, who has asked to be replaced for his new commitments as Synod Rapporteur and CCEE Vice President; thanks to **H. E. Msgr. Giampaolo Crepaldi**, president of the Social Pastoral Care Commission, who concludes his second mandate. Thanks also to **H. E. Msgr. Zbignevs Stankevics**, President of the Evangelisation and Culture Commission, and to **H. E. Msgr. Leo Cushley**, President of the Family and Life Commission, who are concluding their first term of office and for whom the Presidency is requesting reappointment for a second five-year term. Together with them, our thanks also go to the Commission Secretaries and Section Heads for their work in serving our churches in their respective areas.

Dear Brothers, I thank you for your attention. We ask the Spirit to enlighten our thoughts and guide our work. May Mary Most Holy and the Patron Saints of Europe intercede for us, watch over our communities and over Europe.

Thank you.