**PLENARY ASSEMBLY**

**'*New steps for a synodal Church in Europe*'**

**Introduction**

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Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

dear participants in the Plenary Assembly,

peace to you! May the greeting of the Risen Jesus be our greeting, which becomes a prayer for our communities and the whole world: today, more than ever, the world needs peace. With Pope Francis, we firmly say no to war; it is a defeat for humanity. We reaffirm our closeness to those who suffer from so many conflicts, especially Ukraine, the Armenian people, and the inhabitants of the Holy Land. We continue to pray for the victims and their families. We continue to pray for the miracle of peace.

Many thanks go to **H.E. Msgr.****Charles SCICLUNA**, *Archbishop of Malta*, for his invitation and welcome. And to his staff, who organised our meeting,

Thank you to the Apostolic Nuncio**, H.E. Msgr. Savio HON TAI-FAI**, for his words of greeting and for bringing us the closeness of Pope Francis: we constantly pray for him, for his life and mission.

Thank you also to **H.E. Card. Pierbattista PIZZABALLA**, *Patriarch of Jerusalem of the Latins,* for his greeting and reflection on the current wave of violence in the Holy Land. Your Eminence, thank you especially for your commitment to peacemaking as a Christian community in that region.

At the end of September, before the opening of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis presided over the public Consistory for the creation of 21 new cardinals, ten of whom are European. We thank the Holy Father for the benevolence with which he looks upon our continent and once again extend our sincerest wishes to the new cardinals.

We will welcome **H.E. Card. Robert Francis PREVOST**, *Prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops*, tomorrow. It is his first participation in our work, and we thank him for the affection and interest with which he regards CCEE. We assure him of our active collaboration and prayers for his new assignment at the service of the universal Church.

A cordial greeting and welcome to **H.E. Msgr. Mariano CROCIATA**, *President of COMECE*, and to **Msgr. Marco GANCI**, *Permanent Observer of the Holy See* to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. We also welcome the new members of CCEE:

**- H.E. Msgr. Vitalij SKOMAROVSKYI**, the new President of the Conference of Roman‑Catholic Bishops in Ukraine, successor to H.E. Mons. Mieczysław Mokrzycki;

**- H.E. Msgr. Luc TERLINDEN,** thenew President of the Bishops' Conference of Belgium, successor to H.E. Card. Jozef de Kesel.

Heartfelt thanks to the latter, who concluded their service as Presidents of their respective Bishops' Conferences.

At the end of last December, at the age of 95, **Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI** concluded his earthly pilgrimage. During his pontificate, he spoke about Europe on several occasions. He always emphasised the importance of Europe's Christian roots and highlighted the necessity of returning to Christ and evangelisation to construct a civilisation of love. We remember him with immense gratitude and invoke Heaven from the Lord for his good and faithful servant.

**The example of European saints and martyrs**

This year marks the fourth centenary of St. Josaphat's martyrdom, and Lithuania officially declared this the Year of St. Josaphat. The celebrations in honour of the holy bishop and martyr have had the power to unite four nations: Lithuania, Ukraine, Belarus, and Poland. Saint Josaphat was such a martyr for Christian unity that Paul VI wanted his remains to be transferred to St. Peter's Basilica, in a solemn ceremony that took place at a time when the Second Vatican Council was discussing ecumenism. It was at the altar of St Basil the Great, where the saint's remains rest, that on 12 November, with Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, we celebrated the Divine Liturgy together with many faithful from the Lithuanian and Ukrainian communities present in Rome.

This anniversary has much to say to Europe today. Saint Josaphat was a stalwart defender of Christian unity and a zealous preacher of the Gospel, a witness to the bond between the peoples of Europe, a bond that goes beyond political diatribes. We are living in particularly tragic times in Europe. For the second year, alas, we celebrate a plenary assembly with a war at the heart of our continent. We have stories of holiness that unite us and are capable of helping to heal the wounds of history. May the example of Saint Josaphat and that of so many saints and martyrs, witnesses of the Gospel, whom we are called to know and follow, help us rebuild the ties that bind us, recognise our shared history, and build a united, peaceful and prosperous Europe.

**Our memory, our history**

It was an intuition that today would be called “fully synodal” that led to the birth of the Council of Bishops' Conferences of Europe. During the Council, European bishops and experts experienced a unique atmosphere of communion. They found inspiration and strength in paragraph 5 of the Council's Decree on the Pastoral Mission of Bishops in the Church, *Christus Dominus*,whichstates: “Wherever special circumstances require and with the approbation of the Apostolic See, bishops of many nations can establish a single conference. Communications between episcopal conferences of different nations should be especially encouraged in order to promote and safeguard the common good”.

In what he called “a simple note”, issued on 4 November 1965, Monsignor Roger Etchegaray, at the time Secretary of the French Bishops' Conference, made a brief overview of the European situation and of the new climate of exchange that was spreading through the continent, also following the birth of the first European institutions. The note also identified several issues to be addressed: from internal migrations that were creating "human, social, religious" problems, and that also led to reflect on "the ever-larger presence of the Muslim world in Christian Europe", to the "responsibility of the Christians of Europe in favour of ecumenism", to the question of "contemporary atheism born of a technical civilization".

Etchegaray proposed two practical measures: establishing a composite commission with delegated bishops and regularly exchanging information between Bishops' Conferences.

These were the first steps that led to the birth of CCEE in 1971. A little more than 50 years after its establishment, we think it is necessary to find new forms of organisation to better respond to the challenges of an ever-changing contemporary society, and that we can work on a revision of our Statutes, also reflecting on the role of continental groupings, as indicated in the last Synod of Bishops. However, we must not forget the original spirit of the Council, the spirit that asked the bishops to network, to work together, and to be an expression of a united continent.

**The synodal path**

The Synod of Bishops on "Communion, Participation, Mission" allowed us to bring our contribution to the synodal path launched by Pope Francis. We organized an important continental stage in Prague, where all conversations and debates took place in public in a transparent manner. We were aware from the start that our task was not to change the deposit of faith nor to give in to the pressures of public opinion. Our task, as pastors, was to listen to the people of God, listen to their questions and challenges, and bring them to the attention of our brother bishops. Ours was not a political endeavour; we have no resistance to overcome.

We are still convinced that “Christ is the hope of Europe”, as John Paul II wrote in *Ecclesia in Europa*, 20 years ago. And we are grateful to Pope Francis for being able to take this evangelical hope on a journey that involves the whole universal Church. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* – whose tenth anniversary we celebrate this month - the Holy Father showed us the way: “A renewal of preaching can offer believers, as well as the lukewarm and the non-practising, new joy in the faith and fruitfulness in the work of evangelization. The heart of its message will always be the same: the God who revealed his immense love in the crucified and risen Christ” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 11).

In our work, we will hear about the developments of this synodal journey from **Cardinal Mario GRECH**, *Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops*, starting with the conclusions deriving from the first part of the Synod; we will reflect on the relationship between synodality and supranational structures and on how to implement the method of spiritual conversation in our meetings, with the help of **Cardinal Jean-Claude HOLLERICH**, *our Vice President and General Rapporteur of the Synod*. We thank them both for continuing to accompany us in our reflection on the Synod.

**European challenges**

This first stage of the Synod of Bishops focused on reality. The Synod was held while Hamas terrorist attacks, which we strongly condemn, provoked a military escalation by Israel in the Gaza Strip, also to be condemned because violence cannot be a way to defend a cause. We renew our call for a continued ceasefire, the continuing release of hostages, and keeping open the humanitarian corridors in Gaza.

The war in Ukraine, now in its second year, does not cease to disturb us. The flow of refugees into European countries has required an *extra* effort from our particular Churches, which have committed themselves to giving not only humanitarian assistance but also pastoral care to those who have been welcomed. We hope that an agreement for a just peace - one of the great victims of this situation - will soon be reached, with respect for international law.

Our particular Churches are also facing the drama of abuse. Following Germany and France, Switzerland, Portugal, Spain and Italy have also presented national reports on abuses that have occurred in our churches. We strongly condemn all kinds of abuse and ask the victims for forgiveness. Much has already been done following the indications of Pope Francis, and the Church is engaging in a laborious and painful process of purification and reconciliation; we must continue to put in place concrete and productive actions to prevent and counter abuse against minors and vulnerable people.

It comforts us to know that the true face of the Church is not that of abuse. We look with pride at our many priests and consecrated persons, who are committed daily to welcoming, accompanying, and comforting so many of our brothers and sisters, helping the least in society, and spreading the Gospel even at the cost of their lives. We thank them for their generous service and their evangelical witness.

Artificial intelligence is a new challenge for society and the Church. We look with particular wonder at what these new technologies can do, but beware of the risks they entail. The new language created by AI poses new challenges to communication and the way these new technologies are used can profoundly change our perception of facts and completely alter our way of thinking. There is an urgent need for reflection on these issues, the ethical implications arising from them, and the social justice to be guaranteed so that no one is left behind.

We should also recall that Christianity is the most persecuted religion in the world, as various international reports, from that of *Aid to the Church in Need* to that of *Open Doors*, have indicated. Similarly, the latest annual report of the *Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe,* published on 16 November, documented that in 2022, there were 748 cases of anti-Christian discrimination in 30 different nations of Europe, an exponential growth compared to the 519 cases documented in 2021.

Despite these difficulties, we are called to fulfil our mission, proclaiming the Gospel and protecting human dignity wherever it is at risk.

Special mention must be made, in this respect, about the issue of life. The case of Indi Gregory, the little English girl whose life support was disconnected against the wish of her parents, has drawn the attention of the whole world and also of Pope Francis, who has made it known that he is praying for the family. The case follows many other similar stories, albeit there are clinical differences. These are not isolated cases. Therefore, today, we are called more than ever to defend the dignity of every human life and the right of all to be cared for and helped to live as long as possible. We cannot accept that a judge should decide on a person's life and death. Life is a gift from God and, as such, must be defended from conception until natural death.

At the same time, there is increasing pressure to guarantee an alleged right to abortion. We view with concern the proposal to enshrine the right to abortion in the French Constitution. We join with the French bishops, who, meeting in a plenary session in Lourdes, firmly rejected the proposal and highlighted how abortions in France last year totalled 234,000, "a sad record in the European Union, a figure that is not decreasing, indeed it is increasing" (*French Bishops' Declaration, 9 November 2023*)

I mentionthese cases since they are the latest. The European trend now seems to be defined and moving along an inclined plane that leads increasingly from a culture of life to a culture of death. We cannot fail to mention the euthanasia law passed in Portugal in the very months leading up to World Youth Day, while in Holland, again this year, euthanasia was also allowed for children under the age of 12.

**For a culture of life**

Faithful to Pope Francis's call to consider the human being in his totality, we bishops want to commit ourselves to developing a new culture of life, which includes caring for the unborn, the conceived, and the terminally ill as well as the poor, the forced migrant, and all the victims we encounter. We will only be a “Samaritan Europe” if we speak with one voice on these crucial issues.

Pope Francis writes again in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “The Samaritan woman became a missionary immediately after speaking with Jesus and many Samaritans come to believe in him “because of the woman’s testimony” (*Jn* 4:39). And Saint Paul, too, after his encounter with Jesus Christ, “immediately proclaimed Jesus” (*Acts* 9:20; cf. 22:6-21). So what are we waiting for?”(*Evangelii Gaudium*, 120).

We are faced with significant challenges that we must tackle together, with a European and Christian spirit that seems to have fallen prey to national interests for too long. The ecumenical path and work with sister Churches will be crucial in this journey. Today, more than ever, we are convinced that the Christian vision can contribute to a true civilisation of love.

This is our task and our challenge in what Pope Francis has repeatedly called “not an era of change, but a change of era”.

Thank you for working together on the challenges that face us and I wish us all a productive plenary.