
Synodal Journey. Italian Bishops: "Opening pathways so that everyone may find their place in the Church"

"To continue along the path taken so far, intensifying the exercise of discernment, starting from the themes and questions proposed in the Guidelines and indicating viable choices, commitments and aspects to be developed". This is the main objective of the Guidelines for the sapiential phase of the Synodal journey of the Churches in Italy, published today. "Building on the two-year narrative phase," the Permanent Council of Bishops writes in the document's preface, "these guidelines build a bridge to the prophetic phase, guiding the Churches in Italy towards an operational discernment process that will lay the foundations for decisions aimed at ecclesial renewal, thus avoiding inward-looking decisions. And even if the emphasis is on the internal life of our communities, the focus remains on the outward mission, that is, on the rationalisation of certain ecclesial dynamics (doctrinal, pastoral, juridical, administrative) in order to promote the encounter between the Gospel, a life-giving and eternal source of energy, and contemporary humanity". This is especially true at a time when "the activities of the Synod are interwoven with the problems and struggles of each one of us, which are the problems and struggles of our world: the consequences of the pandemic on public health, the economy and society; the tragic climate of war; the ecological, professional and existential crises. Many individuals and many households in our country are experiencing precariousness and disorientation". The text - enriched with some infographics - includes a chronological programme with the agenda of the various phases and events leading up to the opening of the prophetic phase in May 2024.

"To open pathways so that everyone can find their place in the Church, regardless of their socio-economic status, origin, legal status, sexual orientation",

is one of the objectives of the third year of the synodal journey. "In the narratives of the two years of listening - the text reads with reference to the past two years - the need for an active commitment has emerged in some crucial areas: peace-building, care for the environment, dialogue between cultures and religions, inclusion of the poor, the elderly, the sick and persons with disabilities". For the Italian Bishops, in all these areas,

"The contribution of the lay faithful, personally involved in professional, civil and social life, is essential. Their witness gives concrete form to the style of proximity in the world".

"The successful model of the socio-political school has formed generations of committed lay men and women", the Italian Bishops' Conference recalled, "and now it is necessary to reflect on the best ways to offer workshops for the formation of thought and action inspired by Christian values." "How can we walk with young people?" is one of the fundamental questions we need to ask ourselves, starting from the recognition that "the younger generations are becoming disenchanted with religious 'feeling' and with the life of the Church". "In order to respond to them, it is not enough to insist on a doctrine that has perhaps been popularised by the new media", the Italian Bishops note: it is necessary to reflect on "the best practices for involving the younger generations and for creating with them forums for reflection on existential and theological themes", as well as "on the ways in which the languages spoken by young people, with their frequently technologically mediated styles, can express specific fragilities, a genuine longing to be part of a community, an authentic need for guidance."

One of the most urgent requests for a new pastoral ministry is the recognition of the "common ministry of the baptised", also through "new ministries."

These ministries, at every level (ordained, instituted, de facto), are not purely 'intra-ecclesial' services, but 'missionary' services open to the world", reads the text, which proposes to "envisage ministries of listening, of hospitality, of charitable service, which are especially necessary in large cities, marked by greater existential fatigue and emptiness."

"The actual recognition of the importance and role of women inside the Church is a matter of urgency.

It is a role that is already widespread, but which is often marked by an informality that prevents a proper appreciation of its ministerial dignity," the Italian Bishops' Conference states in its invitation: "It is not a question of extending prerogatives, but of rethinking the contribution of women in terms of the very meaning of ministry and the profile of authority within the Church". **The Guidelines also call for greater involvement of the laity, "with specific mandates and functions", in order to "relieve the heavy burden on parish priests** who are overwhelmed by growing administrative responsibilities". The operational proposal is

to entrust the administration of parishes without a resident pastor (pastoral diaconia) to a deacon,

in accordance with Canon 517 §2 of the Code of Canon Law. The Italian Bishops' Conference calls for an added value to be given to community animators (lay people, consecrated persons, deacons) or pastoral areas (a theme developed in various workshops on hospitality). This already exists in some dioceses, also in the form of teams or groups of pastoral animators. The text also recommends "a simplification of procedures, e.g. marriage certificates, which are currently too complicated", as well as the possibility of centralising certain administrative activities within dioceses. Moving from a "pastoral care of events" to a "pastoral care of daily life" is the concrete recommendation to "initiate a reflection also in parishes, pastoral units, Curia offices, at all levels" in order to "clarify individual competences and improve synergy."

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