
Inland areas. Archbishop Accrocca: “There cannot be a one-size-fits-all pastoral approach”

Inland areas “have the quality of forming communities, places where bonds are strengthened and where people congregate.” Moreover, “it is necessary to start from the periphery, as Pope Francis has so well expressed, in order to understand all the rest. In fact, the centre is understood best when seen from the periphery,” said Cardinal **Matteo Zuppi**, Archbishop of Bologna and President of the Italian Episcopal Conference, in his address to the Meeting of the Bishops of Inland Areas held in Benevento, Italy, on 16 and 17 July. “All communities are important, even the smallest ones,” said His Eminence, stressing: “The hinterland is not the past. These areas represent our present and show us the future”. At the heart of the meeting was a reflection by Msgr. **Franco Giulio Brambilla**, Bishop of Novara and President of the Bishops' Commission for the Doctrine of the Faith, Proclamation and Catechesis, who considered the “**symphony of baptismal and lay ministries in the framework of ecclesial ministries**” and put forward three pastoral proposals for the “forma ecclesiae” in the inland areas: a **pastoral care team** - distinguishing between “small communities” (“subsidiary churches”) and the “deanery community” (or “pastoral unity church”), to be pursued in the context of the pastoral ministry that may be carried out in both areas; a **service of care** - a truly charitable service that must be both spiritual and material; and an **educational centre**, which includes the paths of Christian initiation, the animation of children (oratory, sports centre) and the pastoral care of young people (adolescents and young adults), to be carried out throughout the pastoral year. At the end of the meeting of the Bishops of the “hinterland”, Monsignor **Giuseppe Baturi**, Archbishop of Cagliari and Secretary General of the Italian Episcopal Conference, called for “a new reflection based on the priorities that have emerged during the various annual meetings”. On the basis of the documents produced by the Italian Episcopal Conference on rural areas, the prelate said, “it would be worthwhile to collect all the fruits of recent years into a single document, based on the practical experience of a number of Bishops, and to make it available to all”. At the end of the meeting, SIR discussed the subject with Monsignor **Felice Accrocca**, Archbishop of Benevento and founder of the meetings of Bishops for inland areas.



It was a very successful meeting, both because of the large and diverse participation of the Episcopate, representing almost 70% of the Italian regions. It was also an experience of true fraternity among us, in a serene atmosphere. This is what makes the difference: not a formal meeting, but a very authentic, spontaneous, fraternal, family-like encounter. That was the added value.

What were the main topics you reflected on during the meeting?

We focused in particular on Monsignor Brambilla's presentation, in which he gave us very practical proposals that received immediate and unanimous feedback. We then moved on to a discussion that took into account the different situations and territories, the different needs and, consequently, the different responses.

There can be no one-size-fits-all answer. In any case, the proposals put forward show the urgency of considering new paradigms; the previous model in which each parish took care of everything is not viable any more.

These models are no longer sustainable. But when we talk about new models, new perspectives, we sometimes have to overcome resistance, the "steeple". Time and again we have to travel 15 kilometres for whatever reason, but when it comes to concentrating the Mass of three parishes - two kilometres apart - in one church, then this becomes an impossible task. We have encountered these difficulties again and again. But we cannot continue to pour new wine into old wineskins, or we will lose everything.

Bishop Brambilla put forward the idea of a pastoral team...

The pastoral team should play a central role, but even in this case it's difficult to give a clear answer, because often the difficulty lies in finding the human energies and resources to create a team, and often the resources are there, but networking is difficult, old patterns are repeated, everyone has their own backyard which becomes a kind of "hortus conclusus", and the challenge is to overcome this old paradigm.

In particular, Monsignor Brambilla postulated a model in a valley that has a somewhat larger community and a parish church with more facilities, which could become the focal point where the Eucharist can be planned every Sunday and every weekday. Other parishes could envisage other types of activities, with the Eucharist celebrated less frequently. These are, of course, only theories and the proposals must be adapted to the specific circumstances. Sometimes the hamlets are very close together and this is easier; in other cases the villages are a 30 minute drive apart and the situation can be more complex.

Monsignor Brambilla also mentioned the service of care and an educational centre for young people...

A high percentage of elderly people live in inland areas, where it's necessary to humanise life and offer accompaniment. In addition to Monsignor Brambilla's proposal, I am thinking of the two realities of young people and the elderly. I'm thinking of voluntary work done by young people to help the elderly and, on the other hand, voluntary work done by the elderly, not so much to help the young, but to help children, because many elderly people guard the places where children play, look after and watch over the little ones. Young people could volunteer to help the elderly by doing something concrete, such as visiting them at home or helping them with the groceries.

It would be an educational experience for young people and an investment in the young that would also benefit the elderly.

Did you address other issues besides the concrete proposals made by Bishop Brambilla in

his presentation?

We touched on a number of issues. However, it was not possible to discuss them in detail in such a short amount of time. Certainly we outlined the need to support the hinterland in order to give a future to these areas and to the country as a whole.

Perhaps even the Italian Bishops' Conference, building on the progress that has been made so far, will have the opportunity to make a more comprehensive intervention on this issue.

Following in the Pope's footsteps, the President of the Italian Bishops' Conference recommended starting from the peripheries...

It is necessary to always start from the periphery, because otherwise, if you start from the centre and move towards the periphery, you will end up halfway, and the peripheries will remain marginalised and deprived of the essentials. Instead,

By starting from the periphery, you reach the heart and everyone is reached out to.

In the final declaration of the meeting, you stressed that "a new form of pastoral care for rural areas could also prove fertile ground for the future, capable of enhancing the realm of agricultural workers..."

This was just a brief remark, although it is clear that the rural environment often characterises our inland areas and needs to be given a new impetus. All the evidence leads us to repeat what we have been saying for many years:

It is erroneous to assume that pastoral ministry can be effectively carried out through a one-size-fits-all approach or on the basis of pastoral projects tailored to urban environments. In fact, that is not all there is, or at least, is it not the main aspect.

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