
Inland territories. Msgr. Accrocca: “we are committed to acting as sentinels in these areas, to form networks, with a view to authentic recovery”

“As shepherds of dioceses in some of the most marginalised areas of the country, covering ten regions, we heeded the suffering and the expectations of our people linked to the steady depopulation of many villages and the lack of essential services. In synodal style, we shared the frustration of our populations and the indifference of national institutions”- write the bishops of dioceses situated in inland areas of Italy, from the North to the South of the country, in a message addressed to their communities and to public institutions, at the conclusion of a meeting held at the 'La Pace' Centre, on the initiative of Archbishop Felice Accrocca. “The most commonly reported problems include the gradual denial of rights, such as the right to health, education, work, mobility, a healthy environment and interconnections. Christian communities, which are frequently the only guardians and anchors of marginalised territories, are keen to contribute to the human and social well-being of the populations of such areas, spreading the message of the Gospel in ways that reflect the specific circumstances of reality,” the prelates stated. *The message encourages people living in inland areas to become “the protagonists of a new season of development, which can only be achieved via joint commitment”, while inviting them “to form networks, leaving aside parochial thinking and embracing a spirit of fraternity and solidarity.”* As the national, regional and local institutions prepare to implement the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, the bishops asked “to define a new development model, one that is both equitable and inclusive, whereby inland territories could truly represent the 'lungs of the country', offering resources and the will to create genuine opportunities for recovery based on their environmental, historical, religious and cultural heritage.” SIR asked Monsignor Felice Accrocca about the future prospects



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[It has been an occasion for sincere, serene and heartfelt sharing among us bishops, and this is important.](#)

[It was also an experience of living, tangible synodality.](#)

[A number of the above-mentioned topics and circumstances emerged, but these require close, in-depth reflection, a process of careful elaboration that was not possible given the short time of the meeting. **Have there been some proposals for the pastoral care of inland territories?** We agreed that some themes must definitely be prioritised, such as the enhancement of the contribution of the laity and of women, within a ministry of increasing relevance, that is, as a ministerial Church centred on Baptism and, therefore, on the involvement and participation of the whole People of God. We also discussed the opportunities - I wouldn't go so far as to say for repopulation - but at least for stopping the demographic decline of inland territories, including by bringing in non-EU citizens. In this context, it is important to further expand and intensify the pastoral care of ecumenism and interfaith dialogue. We then discussed popular religiosity, which has a strong impact on our realities - how can it be enhanced? How can certain expressions be purified and substantiated with the Word of God? These are major issues, which require further reflection. But now the path has been mapped out. **When will you meet again?** We are planning to meet again here in Benevento on August 29-30, 2022. We](#)

hope to involve other bishops and additional regions by then, in order to have a full and comprehensive picture of the Italian reality. We will be in close contact with each other during the year, and we have set ourselves a small homework assignment: each of us will write down some good practices regarding the pastoral care of inland territories, making the most of the strengths and identifying ways to promote them. The contributions will form part of a publication, which will include the proceedings of this two-day meeting, the speech of the Secretary General of the Italian Bishops' Conference, Msgr. Stefano Russo, and the final message of the meeting. **What are the unifying elements of inland areas and what are the differences from a pastoral point of view?** First of all, there is a higher number of priests in southern regions compared to the north, although the general decline in the number of priests is a common feature. In fact we expect a smaller presence of clergy in southern Italy in the medium-short term. Common difficulties include, at times, facing changes in the pastoral model, that is, almost wanting to grow stricter in the long term.

The temptation to say "this is how it has always been done" is present both in the North and in the South of the country.

Nowadays people travel for all kinds of reasons, and yet occasionally we are told: "Mass has to be held here." These aspects recurred in the speeches of several bishops - although they concerned different social and economic contexts. **What are the most pressing needs of inland territories?** First of all, many people feel they have been forgotten. *The first concern is not to be left behind. As bishops, we are committed to ensuring our local presence, to acting as sentinels in these areas, often lacking everything.* If the Church were also to leave, the local inhabitants would feel doomed. Our intention is to streamline and coordinate our energies and efforts, channelling them into common paths, so as to prevent the temptation to work separately, which would greatly diminish effective activity. **Is dialogue with local authorities equally important?** It certainly is. However,

we also wish to remind the central government about the crucial need to provide support for inland areas.

This is a problem that extends throughout the country and it must be addressed at national level, before being tackled by local authorities. It must be an item on the political agenda, and not forgotten or sidelined. We hope that by acting as a 'bridge' between the various regions and operating within a virtually national framework, we will succeed in prompting the central government to take action in this respect. Clearly, it is also important to establish a dialogue with the local authorities: this dialogue must be preserved, fostered and encouraged, in freedom, respectful of roles and diversities, and in a climate of harmony. **How does the path of the bishops of inland territories relate to the synodal path of the Italian Church?** Both journeys are in their early stages. Our meeting constitutes a source of enrichment that can be shared and disseminated, and could eventually be enhanced in the broader context of the synodal journey of the Italian Church.

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