

Rete



dei Viandanti

Via Giuditta Sidoli, 94 - 43123 Parma

Letter to the Italian Church

This letter is addressed to all the People of God living in Italy, in occasion of the 50 years from the beginning of the Second Vatican Council. It was written all together by a network of groups and communities (Rete dei Viandanti/Wayfarers' Network) and is the result of a synodal process, characterised by discussion and confrontation that lasted several months.

With particular concern, we are addressing to the Bishops, our Shepherds.

In taking the floor, as baptised individuals, we feel the need to express our gratitude, for having received the Gospel's announcement of salvation by those believers who came before us, in our communities (sometimes in a humble and hidden way), in our country and in the whole world; for the testimony of faith they offered us; for the courage they showed not to tone down the Gospel's good news; and for the commitment they put in building a freer, more merciful, simpler, more audacious, opener, more fraternal, closer to the Gospel and more Conciliar Church. The gift we received is a task we are in charge of at the same time, so to further bear fruits to the People of God.

We would also like to express our gratitude to all men of good will, who, in their faith, religion and culture, also look for truth, peace and justice. Their common testimony and research help us purifying our own faith in Jesus Christ.

Just in the name of this responsibility, we feel we cannot be silent in front of the challenges our time puts out to the Christian faith, because we consider that they are not properly handled by the announcement and the pastoral as they are set today.

In the heart of the story of our time

In what epoch-making scenario are we in to witness the Gospel?

Ambivalent context

The globalisation determines ambivalent contexts that, on the one side, offer - thanks to the new media - occasions of dialogue and cultural integration, besides of economic and social development, but on the other side, are often connoted by forms of decline and exploitation at different levels. Even today, social and personal sufferance is still evident, making the incipit of *Gaudium et spes* still modern: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts".

Some positive signs of change can be noticed, such as the wider-spread sensitivity to freedom of thought and speech, the wide-spread demand of equality in the resource distribution and forms of cooperation to overcome the underdevelopment, the defence

of women's and children's dignity and the activity of peace and human rights movements.

Among distress and hope

In the West, in the Catholic Church wide-spreading situations of distress are noticed due to the difficulty of the hierarchy to respond to the signs of the times in faithfulness to the Gospel's spirit, giving concreteness to listening attitudes and practices, synodality and co-responsibility as fruit and development of the Second Vatican Council through a positive confrontation among pastors and believers.

All over the world, there are living experiences of communities, local Churches, groups, laymen, priests, religious and bishops, who try witnessing the Gospel; are committed to build a more peaceful and right world, promoting the weakest, at their own risk and with sacrifices, sometimes, even of their own life; and try to build a Church experience as a community, where to enhance the dignity of the common Baptism.

With these feelings and the true sense of the responsibilities they entail, we feel necessary to try understanding how the Council can be still today inspiration for the life of the Church.

To read the new signs of the times: Goal and chance

The faithfulness to the conciliar methodology leads us to read the signs of the times, scrutinising them in the light of the Gospel. We think three signs are the clearest word the Spirit suggests to the Church.

To say God

According to us, the first sign is radical: To say God. In these fifty years after the Council, the secularization process has deeply changed the relationship of our society with the "Religious" and the Christian tradition. "To say God" means to be aware that we need to return to the essential themes of the Gospel and, at the same time, to be conscious of the cultural complexity and the real challenges this entails: The world is thirsty for God, but not necessarily for the Christian God; it often shows a new demand for spirituality that is not easy to decode, besides lay, secular and individual forms of religiosity; and asks for a relationship with the Transcendence closer to its life path and more immediate to it.

"To say God, the God of Jesus from Nazareth" in the plurality of cultures, values and religions of our time, which should not be demonised, but welcomed and let be fermented. This is the paradoxical and radical existential challenge we are facing. It would be nice that in the merry occasion of the *Year of Faith*, the attention was more directly focused on the Gospel's Word rather than on the "Catholic Church Catechism".

The multicultural context

A second sign is the multicultural context we live in. The main migration movements are changing the face of our towns and urge us to take a wider look around to reconsider our being citizens and believers. All this is looked by many as a threat, an attack to our identity and affluence. It is rather a great opportunity to reconsider our belonging to the large human family, whose union and reconciliation the ecclesiastical community should be the sign of. It is therefore necessary to elaborate *an ethics of the living together*, where the theme of the foreigner's hospitality, peculiarly biblical, calls us to recognise the other as the face of God. Their welcoming cannot be toned down in the

name of supposed Christian identities; movements' and parties' explicit racist positions cannot leave the Pastors silent in order to preserve continuity with power or fearing to lose support.

The immigration and the arrival of people from other countries brought actually up the issue of the relationship with men and women of different religions or Christian denominations, sometimes with significant presences in our parishes. Parishes are just the right place where true ecumenism can be taken ahead from its broad-based members, at a level that is certainly different from what is needed in a theological confrontation or in the institutional relationships among the different Churches. The evangelization should be free of any confessional competition and proselytism in the name of the Gospel. Hence, we hope for communities open to any opportunity to meet the other, so to fulfil also the need for inter-religious dialogue with people of non-Christian faith (Jewish, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus...).

The poor: A global presence

A third, important sign is the global spreading out of the poor, which goes behind the North/South division of the world. We are called to pronounce the words of the Gospel to overcome a crisis that is not the end of the world, but the end of a model of the world. It is not only an economic-financial crisis, but also cultural and ethical. It is a systemic more than contingent crisis, which cannot be overcome by making simple adjustments. It requires radical and alternative changes instead, both in terms of patterns and lifestyles. The triumph of wild capitalism without rules, the financialization of economy, the individualistic assumption identifying in the individual interest the trigger of the economic development, require cultural and ethical antidotes, as well. The vision of the human being as a person, as a relational being especially in the Jewish-Christian conception is at stake.

More in depth, this entails the need to recover the not only pastoral approach of a poor Church of the poor, as indicated in the Council, that regards and evaluates the reality starting from the poor's point of view: A Church living poverty and sobriety as constitutive and essential elements rather than extras. A Church abandoning - at all levels - any remains of power and opulence for a loving testimony of service and sober economy, is a powerful sign of the Gospel!

Walking together: The crises and the words we lack

We hope that Pastors and Christians will frankly speak out, in particular against any lack of justice (local and global) and the relationship between the weak and the ones holding the power. In fact, we consider that the responsibility in announcing the Gospel requires truth and that the Church talks and acts in a way to recognise and favour people's freedom and promotion.

Free confrontation and listening

We rate therefore necessary that the Church ensures a free confrontation of the existing diversities: Freedom of thought should be accepted without marginalisation, keeping in mind that, sometimes, obedience is not a virtue. As for the local Church, we wished the Bishop's synthesising and leading ministry did not ignore the listening of different experiences. We think that freedom of speech, of theological research and an

active public opinion in the Church would not threaten the Bishops' specific teaching mission, making it, on the contrary, stronger and more visible.

Update/Change

We feel that today, the Church is going through the necessary change or update (conciliar word definitely to recover) more out of *need* (in particular for the strong reduction of the number of priests) than out of consciousness, with the concrete risk of totally improper solutions and the involvement of laymen just as auxiliary and reserve troops, besides any formal recognition. This leaves then space to pseudo-update in "sectarian" forms of religious life: Closed and self-sufficient social worlds, which require their members' total dedication, giving them back moral and interior total support and protection. We could even face a sectarianism of parishes, too, to the detriment of the Church's vocation and nature to universality.

Common priesthood

According to the Council, source and apex of the ecclesiastical life is Liturgy. In the light of this principle, it is surprising that nowadays the reform of Liturgy is undergoing a strong relativisation leading even to the issuing of norms that favour back the use of the old-fashioned pre-conciliar rite.

The most serious problem the ecclesiastical life is experiencing is the gap between "ministerial priesthood" and "common priesthood" and the re-establishment of an authoritarian hierarchy in their relationship. The consequent risk - although not right away perceivable - is the ineffectiveness of the "common priesthood", which among its visible effects, results into the continuous decrease in the vocations to "ministry priesthood".

As need for the Gospel and ecclesiastical opportunity, every effort should be clearly made to build a Church that is actually coincident with the People of God, according to the indications of the Council. Starting from the lowest levels, although so meaningful, of the purification of the language (the rediscovery of the common priesthood of the faithful should make improper and outdated the use of the term "priests" to mean ministerial priests only) to deeply reconsider the traditional training of priests, overcoming the "gap" from the People of God and the human history.

Co-responsibility

What looks however still evanescent is the role of the Christian community. If the Christian community, the one regularly celebrating the Eucharist every Sunday, has no role, no decision-making autonomy, it is automatically limited to execute, more or less faithfully, orders and prescriptions coming from above. In this context, there is no space then, for the laymen's real co-responsibility. It rather favours an image of the Church competing more than dialoguing with the world, closed in itself more than open to the "signs of the times". The danger is a liturgical neo-triumphalism (maybe implemented, as already mentioned, by the officially legitimated recovery of pre-conciliar rites).

Autonomy of and from politics

There is the danger that the belief that, in order to protect the existence itself of the Church, it is necessary to work "politically" acting as a power that confronts with the

powers of the world, considering subordinate or even disturbing the role believers should laicly have in the human and political society, becomes prevailing in the hierarchy. We wonder whether the autonomy of politics is an established principle in the hierarchy or is not rather an abstractly and rhetorically stated slogan, contradicted and neglected in concrete terms.

So, there is the risk the Church looks like a political subject, who wants to state its own power, also referring to a divine authority. A great part of the People of God have the unpleasant feeling to be treated as unable to take conscious decisions. Let alone that the final paragraphs of the conciliar Constitution *Gaudium et spes* refers to the value of the dialogue inside the Church among believers and non-believers, in order to work together to build up a world in genuine peace (n. 92), hoping the believers might join with all the ones who love and search justice to fulfil this great task on Earth (n. 93 and also n. 57): Yet, nowadays, there is the feeling that a relationship of contrast may be easily generated again, rejecting the patient and meek effort of this dialogue and the related possible cooperation, making the Church look inflexible, diffident and hostile.

It is therefore to serenely recognise that these deviations from the “main road” of the Council led and are leading to a dead end.

Synodality

To mature a new global conscience is no privilege of few only, but responsibility of all, in a lively dialectic relationship. Before than pronouncements or praxes of different forms, the Council was an attitude or a way to experience the Fathers’ faith as “Church” in the history.

We think we should have the courage of being as frank and patient as in a synodal approach, so that all - laymen, priests, religious and bishops - help each other to rediscover and make operative the functions each one is devolved on, especially in order to share the focus on how to carry on the necessary update.

The synodality of the Church often clashes against praxes, beliefs and traditions that make it very hard to understand its meaning and value. In a synodal Church all voices should not just be listened to, but considered and involved in the decision-making process, with particular attention to the young, who are ever more absent from our communities. Only if we involve them, we can hope for a factual future. A future that can invent a synodal process at all levels seems to be the most authentic way to be in line with what was given us in the Gospel’s announcement, in the baptism and in the eucharist.

A different pastoral praxis

Convinced that the Council has been the Spirit’s great gift to the Church in our time, we think we can sum up the following conversions as nowadays necessary in the conciliar sense:

- From a Church centred on itself to a Church centred on the service of the Kingdom given to the poor;
- From the prevailing sacramentalization to the primate of evangelisation;
- From clericalism to the co-responsibility of all baptised;
- From the individualistic improvisation to a planning, organic and contextualised pastoral;

- From the activism to the wisdom of the cross as measure of effectiveness/efficiency.

It is a path entailing a passage from a pastoral praxis meant to educate, to teach truths (to be learned) and to illustrate precepts and rules (to be faithfully followed) to a praxis that puts in the centre the training of mature consciences, people able to take up their own responsibilities, join with the others and walk on their own legs, think with their own head, and take humanising and liberating basic decisions. Living like that - in this fertile communitarian dynamic - the equality of the status of baptised, the diversity of ministries and charismas and the risk in confronting and acting sympathetically in the world.

This will lead to discover, with joy and naturalness, that the living and beating heart of the pastoral are the human and personal relationships. The pastoral should therefore focus on the loving attention to the man in his concreteness, to the suffering man, who hopes and is open to the discovery of the Love of God. In this framework, also the attention to all those realities usually perceived as different (e.g. homosexual people) will find their right order.

At the same time, a community theology of the relationship of liberation will develop together with a pastoral that refers to the encounter with the scandal of the Gospel and the responsibility for Tradition, which is also constant assumption of the service to the world *and* the Church.

All this invites us to reconsider the Church as eschatological and pilgrim community spread in the world in a state of mission. The meditation of the Word should therefore be the permanent Christological centre.

The main constitutions of the Council highlight the common dignity and responsibility of all Christians, based on:

The Baptism,

The listening to the Word,

The dimension as community of the Church starting from its Liturgy,

The value of the pastors' collegiality,

The respect of the plurality in decisions,

The mutual listening of pastors and believers.

As the *Dei Verbum* states (n. 10), the hierarchy has the task to keep watch that the deposit of faith is not betrayed. Yet, all believers have the task, and so the responsibility to elaborate and update that deposit of faith.

To conclude, *the perspective of a permanent synod* stands out as the most proper tool to move towards that ecclesiology of communion that is however always to be acquired and confirmed: A synodality able to involve all the members of the People of God. The enhancement of the "lay ministry" is the key condition to walk to a synodal Church.

Towards a pluralism of ecclesial "forms"?

The path to salvation cannot be but the primary urge of every disciple of Christ and apostle of the Gospel. The perspective of salvation is historically embodied in a single model of Church and finds it hard to existentially adhere to the faces (and the sufferance) of a complex, very articulate and often fragmented society. The hypothesis

of experiencing different forms of Church should not be scary. Paul says: "...that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised. For God, who was at work in Peter as an apostle to the circumcised, was also at work in me as an apostle to the Gentiles. James, Cephas and John, those esteemed as pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along" (Gal 2,7-10).

It does not cancel, but postulates the conviviality of the differences. We can hope for a Church of Peter and a Church of Paul (different forms of the single Church of Christ), which shake their hands, but go to different directions, having as integral convergence point the poor and the promised kingdom.

This sounds to us a strong stimulus coming from the Word, to think over very carefully, opening our way to free inspirations of the fire of the Spirit, instead of mortifying and letting them dye off.

At the more general level of being ecclesial, a crux to be solved in reasonable times is the full assumption of the *status of laity* the current societies found their constitution on. Laity that does not exclude and marginalise the realities referring to religious experiences. Laity that asks the Church to abandon the current forms of activity in the public that do not respect its spirit (such as the confessional teaching of the Catholic religion in the State of all). Already the Council warns the Church: It is necessary to give up "the exercise of certain rights which have been legitimately acquired, if it becomes clear that their use will cast doubt on the sincerity of her witness or that new ways of life demand new methods" (*Gaudium et Spes* 76).

Emblematic sum-up numbers: The women in the Church

If the growing sensitivity to the women's liberation is one of the most eloquent signs of the time, the ministry of the women in the Church looks like the test "place", where all the remarks we are here making, find mirror and emblematic summary.

The liberation of the Gospel is for all human beings, so for women, too. Hence, it should be experienced first in the Church, as testimony of the new life created in Christ. Such liberation path is followed with great fatigue in the ecclesial communities, because it urges to review a long-aged praxis of devaluation of the women, of exclusion from ordained ministries, of privation of the right to talk with authority: Praxis that is said to be founded on Jesus' will and a thousand-year-long Tradition.

Without the claim of replacing the teaching authority, we wonder only, in the simplicity but also authenticity of our conscience of believers, if it was Jesus' praxis towards women, as it is shown in the Gospels.

We are sorry to observe that the theme-issue of the women's condition in the Church still generates in a great part of the clergy, a certain annoyance and is however considered as marginal. It is instead central and has deep implications in the exegetics, in the understanding of the doctrine and, above all, in the relationships within the ecclesial society.

Also thanks to women biblists and theologians, we think that the post-Council period brought out important indications:

- God's maternal and paternal image

- The breaking news of Jesus' behaviour towards women
- The “partiality” of genders, so that the man and the woman *together* are God's image
- The possibility of “gender readings” that give a new light to interpret many pages of the Bible
- The existence of women's diaconry in some of the first communities.

Then, all these remarks and new awareness lead to a new “view” that sees the anti-Gospel obsolescence of a clerical pyramidal structure that seems to tend to self-conservation and does not seem prone to promote a ministerial priesthood closer to the communities, walking by with all baptised in equal dignity, really admitting the common priesthood with all the different roles of service to the community, adapted to the times and people's charisma.

Without being argumentative, we feel actually the need for a path of *reconciliation*, which, starting from a critical analysis of the past and the recognition of the misjudgement of women, may lead to the awareness of a necessary conversion and the request for forgiveness.

The beauty of the Gospel

The Church needs re-expressing faith and hope for the prophetic strength and beauty of the Gospel, avoiding the moralistic, fearful and defensive tones it is nowadays often perceived when about big social, bio-ethical and cultural issues claiming our attention and scrutinisation.

The Church is however prophetic strength when it recovers to the Word and updates the deposit of faith following a logic far from the world and when it is at work to alleviate the human sufferance (Jesus' works and words), building brotherhood, care, justice, meekness, forgiveness and reconciliation: *Charity is exercised Gospel and the Gospel is spoken charity*. Through this *Gospel of Charity*, the Church opens to the world, letting the Word of God shake it and give it a conscience; the medicine of mercifulness replace judgement, power and weapons of sentence; attention and dedication to the other replace the indifferent or hostile inactivity, in an authentic and full relationship of liberation in the Gospel at the same time. It is then that the world calls it out and it becomes sacrament of Christ light of the nations.

It is up to us all to help and open the spaces, in the name of true communion, to a Church faithful to the Gospel.

The priorities we propose

To conclude, we rate useful to summarise the considerations we are making here in “points”, the Church should handle with greater urgency and unanimous determination.

- **Dialogue with the world.** Full assumption of the problems besetting the modern man (lack of justice, violence, corruption and ethical and social emergencies), in the awareness that the Church shows love for the whole human family, without being in contrast to it as rival, but dialoguing and working together for justice and peace.
- **Unity of the Church.** Marked recovery of the ecumenical path, which looks weary, when not come to a dead end; urge to the sister Churches and verification of the will to converge to the *Primate of the Word*.
- **Celebration of the Faith.** Convinced relaunch of the reform of Liturgy according to the Council, without nostalgic confusions and ritualism; *Ecclesial centrality of the Eucharist* and reconsideration of rigorist disciplines (e.g.: for remarried divorced and cohabiting couples).
- **Synodal Church.** To make the ecclesiology of communion of the Council finally true, in spirit and institutional forms, highlighting the common dignity and responsibility of all Christians founded on the Baptism.
- **Ministerial priesthood and common priesthood.** Consideration about the presbyters' role, their training and the permanence of their celibacy; communitarian consideration about the way to truly enhance the *women's ministry* in the Church, thinking over the possibility to restore the women's diaconry; and convinced enhancement of the adult lay condition, with clear responsibilities within the ecclesial community.
- **Poor Church of the poor.** Radical reconsideration about what being faithful to the Gospel today means as regards: Use and management of the goods; the preferential option of the poor and the liberation in the Gospel; the relationship with the “power” and the “lay” dimension of the State.

The *Rete dei Viandanti*:

Mounier Cultural Association / Cremona; *Casa della solidarietà* / Quarrata (PT); *Chiesa oggi* / Parma; *Chicco di Senape* / Turin; *Città di Dio* (Religious Culture Ecumenical Association) / Invorio (NO); *Comunità del Cenacolo* / Merano (BZ); *Esodo* / Mestre (VE); *Fine Settimana* (Cultural Association “G. Giacomini”) / Verbania (VB); *Galilei* / Padua; *Gruppo ecumenico donne* / Verbania (VB); *Gruppo per il pluralismo e il dialogo* / Colognola ai Colli (VR); *Il Concilio Vaticano II davanti a noi* / Parma; *Il filo. Gruppo laico di ispirazione cristiana* / Naples; *Il Gallo* / Genoa, *L'altrapagina* / Città di Castello (PG); *Lettera alla Chiesa fiorentina* / Florence; *Oggi la Parola* / Camaldoli (AR)

Parma, 22 February 2013

Cathedra Petri