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Opening of the works of the 71st General Assembly of the Italian Episcopal Conference (C.E.I.) in the presence of the Holy Father

At 16.35 this afternoon, in the New Synod Hall, the Holy Father Francis inaugurated the 71st General Assembly of the Italian Episcopal Conference (C.E.I.), taking place in the Vatican from today until 24 May on the theme: "Which ecclesial presence in the current communicative context".

After the initial prayer and greeting to the Assembly, the Pope pronounced the following address:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers, good evening!

Welcome to the Vatican. But I think that this room [the Synod Hall] is in the Vatican only when there is the Pope, because it is on Italian territory. Also the Paul VI Hall... That is what they say, is it true?

Thank you so much for your presence, for inaugurating this day of Mary Mother of the Church. Let us all say from our heart, all together: "*Monstra te esse matrem*". Always: "*Monstra te esse matrem*". It is prayer: "Make us feel that you are the mother", that we are not alone, that You accompany us as a mother. It is the motherhood of the Church, of the Hierarchical Holy Mother Church, which is gathered here ... But that she is a mother. "Hierarchical Holy Mother Church", as Saint Ignatius [of Loyola] so liked to say. May Mary, our Mother, help us so that the Church may be a mother. And – following the inspiration of the fathers – may our soul also be a mother. The three women: Mary, the Church and our soul. All three mothers. May the Church be Mother, may our soul be a Mother.

I thank you for this meeting, which I would like to be a moment of dialogue and reflection. I thought, after thanking you for all the work you do – it is a lot! – of sharing with you three of my concerns, not to "cudgel" you, no, but rather to say that these things worry me, and you will see... And to give you the opportunity to speak, so that you can address all your questions, concerns and criticisms to me – it is not a sin to criticize the Pope here!

It is not a sin, it can be done – and the inspirations that you carry in your heart.

The first thing that troubles me is the *crisis of vocations*. And it is our paternity that is at stake here. Regarding this concern, rather, this haemorrhage of vocations, I have spoken to at the Plenary of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life, explaining that it is the poisoned fruit of the culture of the temporary, of relativism and the dictatorship of money, which distances the young from consecrated life; alongside, certainly, the tragic reduction in births, this “demographic winter”; as well as the scandals and lukewarm witness. How many seminaries, churches and monasteries will be closed in the coming years due to a lack of vocations? God knows. It is sad to see that this land, which has for long centuries been fertile and generous in producing missionaries, nuns, priest full of apostolic zeal, is entering along with the old continent in a vocational sterility without searching for effective remedies. I believe that it searches for them but we are not managing to find them!

I propose, for example, a more concrete – because we must begin with practical things, those that are in our hands – I propose to you a more concrete and generous sharing, *fidei donum*, among Italian dioceses, which would certainly enrich all the dioceses that give and those that receive, strengthening in the hearts of the clergy and the faithful the *sensus ecclesiae* and the *sensus fidei*. See if you can ... make an exchange of *fidei donum* [priests] from one diocese to another. I think of the dioceses in Piedmont: there is great sterility... And I think of Puglia, where there is an overabundance... Think, a good creativity: a *fidei donum* system within Italy. Some of you are smiling... But let us see if you are able to do this.

My second concern: *evangelical poverty and transparency*. For me, always – because I learnt as a Jesuit in the constitution – poverty is the “mother” and the “wall” of apostolic life. It is the mother because it gives birth, and it is the wall because it protects. Without poverty there is no apostolic zeal, there is no life of service to others... It is a concern that relates to money and transparency. In reality, one who believes cannot speak of poverty and live like a pharaoh. At times we see these things... It is a counter-witness to speak of poverty and lead a life of luxury; and it is very scandalous to deal with money without transparency or to manage the assets of the Church as if they were personal assets. You know the financial scandals that there have been in some dioceses... Please, it makes me very sad to hear that an ecclesiastic has allowed himself to be manipulated, putting himself in situations in which he is out of his depth or worse still, managing the “widow’s loose change” in a dishonest manner. We have the duty to manage in an exemplary way, through clear and common rules, what one day we will give account for to the master of the vineyard. I think of one of you, for example – I know him well – who never, never invites to dinner or to lunch with the money of the diocese: he always pays from his own pocket, otherwise he does not invite. Little gestures, as a purpose expressed in spiritual exercises. We have the duty to manage in an exemplary way, through clear and common rules, what one day we will give account for to the master of the vineyard. I am aware – this I want to say to you – and I acknowledge that the C.E.I. has done much in recent years especially, on the path of poverty and transparency. Good work for transparency. But more must be done for certain things, but I will speak about this later.

And the third concern is the *reduction and merging of dioceses*. It is not easy, because, especially in this time... Last year we were about to merge one with another, but they came to me from there and said: “It is tiny, the diocese... Father, why are you doing this? The university has gone, they have closed a school, now there is no mayor, there is a delegate, now you too...”. And we feel this pain and say, “Let the bishop remain, because they are suffering”. But I think that there are dioceses that can be merged. I already raised this matter on 23 May 2013, the reduction of Italian dioceses. It is certainly a pastoral need, studied and examined several times – you know – even before the Concordat of 1929. Indeed, Paul VI, in 1964, speaking on 14 April to the Assembly of bishops, spoke of the “excessive number of dioceses”; and subsequently, on 23 June 1966, he returned to the issue when he met with the Assembly of the C.E.I., saying: “It will therefore be necessary to redraw the boundaries of some dioceses, but most of all, we must go ahead with the merging of not a few dioceses, so that the resulting circumscription has a territorial extension, a demographic consistency, and an endowment of clergy and works sufficient to support a truly functional diocesan organization and to develop effective and unitary pastoral activity”. So far, Paul VI. And also the Congregation for Bishops in 2016 – but I spoke about it in 2013 – asked the regional Episcopal Conferences to send to the General Secretariat of the C.E.I. their opinions regarding a plan to reorganize the dioceses. So, we are talking about an historic and current issue, neglected for too long, and I believe the time has come to conclude it as soon as possible. It is easy to do it, it is easy ...

Perhaps there are one or two cases that cannot be done now, for what I said earlier – because it is an abandoned territory – but something can be done.

These are my three concerns that I wanted to share with you as starting points for reflection. Now I leave the floor open to you, and I thank you for the *parrhesia*. Many thanks.
