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Communicating the Christian Family: an inexhaustible source of new life

Meeting of the Spokespersons and Media Officers of the Catholic Bishops' Conferences of Europe

Lisbon, Portugal, June 11-14, 2014

The communication of Pope Francis and the Synod on the Family have been the core of the meeting of the spokespersons of the Catholic Bishops' Conferences, who met in Lisbon (Portugal), 11 through 14 of June, 2014, on the invitation of the Secretary General and Spokesman of the Portuguese Catholic Bishops' Conference, Fr. Manuel Barbosa.

The meeting, which was held at the Seminary of the Dehonian Fathers in Lisbon, was attended by 50 spokespersons or persons responsible for Communication of the Bishops' Conferences in Europe.

Following an introduction by **Paul Wuthe**, spokesman of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Austria, the spokespersons of the Church in Europe have analyzed the 'media phenomenon' of Pope Francis, a true global communicator.

Since his election, Pope Francis has had a strong presence in the media. Every single day, in fact, the Pope appears in the newspapers all around the world, fills the pages of Facebook, and is the subject of many tweets. His communication is not the result of a media strategy. It is made of simple but always significant words and gestures, which were able to fill the gap with people, and show the Pope's proximity with everyone. This 'narrative style' of Pope Francis, which is consistent with his coherence and authenticity of life as the successor of Peter, is an opportunity for the whole Church, and paves the way to a genuine dialogue with the world. The Pope has not only won the

The Council of the Bishops' Conferences of Europe (CCEE) encompasses the current 33 European Bishops' Conferences, represented by their Presidents, the Archbishop of Luxembourg, of the Principality of Monaco, the Maronite Archbishop of Cyprus and the Bishop of Chişinău (Moldova Rep.), the Eparchial Bishop of Mukachevo and the Apostolic Administrator of Estonia. The current President is Cardinal Péter Erdő, Archbishop of Esztergom-Budapest, Primate of Hungary; the Vice-Presidents are Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco, Archbishop of Genoa, and Mgr Józef Michalik, Archbishop of Przemyśl (Poland). The General Secretary is Mgr Duarte da Cunha. The Secretariat is based at St Gallen (Switzerland). www.ccee.eu

hearts of people, but he has also changed the attitude of many journalists, who are now more open and ready to listen to the reasons of the Church. Despite of this, his communication, which is made of short and concise expressions, entails certain risks, given the simplistic and reductionist nature of the current media culture. Church communicators have the task to continue to tell the whole life of the Church and the proclamation of the Gospel, even against the mainstream media, to avoid falling into a form of cult of personality.

In Lisbon, Church communicators, with the help of **Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri**, Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, and **Father Federico Lombardi**, director of the Vatican Press Office, also made a special preparation to communicate the forthcoming Extraordinary Assembly on the Family. The Synod on the Family is a multi-stages process which mobilized the various components of the Christian community. The process began with the widespread distribution of a questionnaire, not to be understood as a survey of the Church on the family, but as a gathering of data about the pastoral models and the challenges posed to the family by contemporary society, marked by rampant individualism. The process of the Synod on the Family provides for the drafting of a working document (*Instrumentum laboris*) to be published soon by the Synod of Bishops, which will form the basis of the reflection of the Synodal Fathers in the extraordinary Assembly of next October (5-19), which will include the presidents of the Catholic Bishops' conferences around the world. The ordinary Synod of Bishops on the Family, supposedly planned for 2015, shall be the final stage of this two-year process.

The discussions have emphasised the image of a Church, that also in this area focuses on transparency, is not afraid of comparison, is ready to face the challenges of history, and presents in a new way the Good News of Christ to the Christian family as the true source of hope and new life. In short, the next Synodal Assembly will respond to the clear idea of Synodal governance and to that *affective* and *effective* communion of the Bishops' college with the successor of Peter that Pope Francis has announced since the beginning of his pontificate.

The European Church communicators have the task to show that this is a universal Synod and not an exclusively European Synod, and therefore the answers at the end of the process, will necessarily have a universal value and will not exclusively suit the Old Continent. Hence the invitation not to have recourse to an exclusively case study approach, i.e. not to dwell only on individual cases, on the difficult situations, which do not fully correspond to the real challenges facing the Church and do not allow to witness the beauty concretely expressed by millions of Christian families who daily live the gospel of Jesus.

During the meeting, the European spokespersons had the opportunity to meet the Minister of Development of the Portuguese Government, **Mr. Miguel Poiares Maduro**, for an informal talk about Europe, in the light of the recent EU elections. They also received some information on the plight and suffering of the population in Ukraine and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and on some new experiences in the area of communication, in particular the reality of Aleteia, as well as a presentation of the activities of SECAM (Symposium of Catholic Bishops' Conferences of Africa and Madagascar) in the area of communication, by its spokesman, **Sir Benedict Assorow**.

They particularly appreciated the visit to *Rádio Renascença* and the meeting with some local journalists who allowed us to verify the expectations of journalists vis-à-vis the spokespersons of the Church.

The meeting was attended by: **Mgr. Pio Alves**, President of the Commission for Social Communications of the Portuguese Catholic Bishops' Conference; **Mgr. José Ignacio Munilla**, President of the Commission for Social Communications of CCEE; **Mr. Benedict Steinschulte**, Official of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, and **Mgr. D. Nuno Brás**, Auxiliary Bishop of Lisbon.

On the occasion of the feast of Saint Anthony, the patron Saint of the City of Lisbon, the participants visited the birthplace and the homonymous church of the Lusitanian capital city. The meeting was concluded with a pilgrimage to Fatima and a meeting with the person responsible of the Social Communication Office of the Marian Shrine.