

Card. Baldisseri: "God believes in young people and entrusts them with responsibilities without hesitation"



A conversation with Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops

Eminence, how will the young Christians of the Holy Land and the Middle East be involved in the next Synod? In spite of their difficulties, did they respond to the questionnaire? Do you think this event will also a source of hope for them?

Indeed, it is very important that the representatives of the new generations living in the biblical territories be heard on the occasion of the Synod on the theme "Young people, faith and vocational discernment". The Eastern and Latin Catholic Churches of that area responded rather broadly to the preparatory consultation. I must say that the Mother Church of Jerusalem - that is, the Latin diocese that extends from Jordan to Cyprus - has particularly taken to heart its contribution to reflections ahead of the Synod. The Apostolic Administrator of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, Msgr. Pierbattista Pizzaballa, has sent me essential information, explaining for example that young people's vigils will be organized to share thoughts on the Synod and pray that it will bear good fruit. On the other hand, in spring, I have been invited to address the young people in the Holy Land who are enthusiastic about this international meeting wanted by Pope Francis, despite the great difficulties they themselves face and their families. Two of these young people will come to the Pre-Synod that we organized in Rome, in the week from March 19 to the 24. All the participants in the Pre-Synodal meeting will have the mission to testify about the situation of young people in their respective countries and the delegates of the Holy Land will obviously be listened to with particular attention.

What do you expect from the Pre-Synod Youth gathering - a rather unusual event - organized in spring? What is its raison d'etre and what novelties does it represent?

Young people will arrive from every continent, from the Episcopal Conferences, from Catholic Associations and Movements, but also chosen outside the usual environments of the Church, so that all the voices will be adequately considered during the Synod of Bishops that will follow in the autumn. The world of work, sport, and art ... each will have its own representatives: Pope Francis insisted on showing great concern for the "distant", the young people of the "peripheries", those who are not part of our network of Catholics faithful. The participants will be able to ask questions, propose ideas and therefore act as intermediaries between the ecclesial institution that derives from the people of God and secular society. The experience that will be proposed to them will consist in getting to know the Church better, discovering what we are more deeply. These young people who are somehow more distant from the Church will comprise approximately 25% of the participants to the Pre-Synod meeting, which will gather about 300 young people together at the International *Pontifical Maria Mater Ecclesiae Colledge* in Rome. There will also be delegates from various Christian confessions and other great religions. Naturally, the Synod foreseen in the autumn will be structured in a very different way, since it is a statutory meeting of Bishops with lay listeners. The young listeners - no more than thirty - will intervene in particular in the working groups, as happened during the Synod on the family. The Pre-Synod was intended for young people to become more protagonists. At the end of the meeting they will approve a document, the result of the work of the entire week, which will express their point of view on the reality of youth and present their expectations, their doubts and their hopes. This document will then help the Synod Fathers to direct and guide their reflections a few months later. People will also be able to follow the Pre-Synodal Meeting through social media, even if not physically present in Rome.

Pope Francis is highly critical of clericalism, inviting the clergy to consider the laity as partners in the life of the Church, and not as workers or servants. Can the Synod for Youth be considered as an important step in these new relationships within the People of God, so that future vocations - priestly or religious - are experienced in a less "elitist" fashion and more in harmony with other vocations that represent the beauty and wealth of the Church?

Of course, it is one of the objectives of the Synod. We will start theologically from baptism and then from the common priesthood of the faithful, then we will see how - starting from this root - the different vocations in the Church are realized, marriage, ordained and non-ordained ministries, charisms and consecrated life ... Multiple forms of volunteering, not linked to an institutional commitment to life will be considered as well. The Synod Fathers are interested in having a global vision of the beautiful ideals of young people. Naturally religious and priestly vocations concern us, therefore we will have representatives of these vocations. However, the Catholic Church does not want to consider only its own needs, but to open itself to all the generous commitments that the Holy Spirit awakens everywhere. We must not put limits on God, He does what He wants, His Holy Spirit is present and active outside our institutions, let us not forget it. The "seeds of the Word" of which the Fathers of the Church once spoke have been re-evaluated by the Second Vatican Council: what is good in the world comes from the Word of God and we welcome it fully, without falling into syncretism, because the fullness of the Word has only one name, Jesus Christ, the center of history, and it is vital for us to proclaim it.

You will preside over the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes on February 11 in the Marian sanctuary in the Hautes-Pyrénées. Bernadette - who was fourteen when the Virgin Mary entrusted her with important responsibilities - is a model for today's young people and for this reason she will be one of the Synod's patron saints...

I received a recent publication from the 'Congregation for the Causes of Saints' which presents a non-exhaustive list of 800 young witnesses of Christ up to the age of thirty, from the martyrs of the early centuries - like Saint Tarcisius - up to Blessed Albertina, nicknamed "the little Maria Goretti from Brazil". It is impressive, since it clearly reveals that God always believes in young people throughout the history of mankind and entrusts them with responsibilities without hesitation, radiating His grace for all through their lives. Do we have patron saints for the Synod on Youth? This is yet to be decided; in any case, figures like Bernadette will have their own space, especially since the rector of the Sanctuary of Lourdes - Father André Cebes - wants future pilgrimages to dedicate a period of preparation for the Synod on Youth starting from February 11, the 160th Anniversary of the apparitions of the Virgin Mary. His initiative really moved me: it will allow tens of thousands of young people going on pilgrimage to Lourdes this year to experience the synodal dynamic desired by Pope Francis. Father Cebes sets an example to be followed in the Church and I hope that his pastoral audacity inspires other Shrines in the world to encourage the awakening and flourishing of all vocations.

After the Synod on Youth there will be the Special Synod on the Amazon, in 2019. You are already working on this in parallel. In what way will this apparently "local" synod have a universal value?

Pope Francis welcomed the proposal of the bishops of the Amazon, happy to offer this event to the world, to all humanity. He has a very lively awareness of the universal value of the Amazonian problems, such as biodiversity, which is one of the themes of his encyclical *Laudato si'*: the integral ecology where man has his place, but also respect for the soul of peoples and their identity in a globalized world ... During his trip to Peru, he proposed this historical event, placing his foot in Amazonia for the first time as Pope. For my part, as Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, I had a first meeting with the local organization - REPAM (Red Eclesial Pan Amazónica) - which brings together the representatives of the nine states and the seven episcopal conferences that are directly interested in the Amazon, being a region that extends over seven millions of square kilometres. The Church has been present there for a long time, but some dioceses which are as large as Italy have only about thirty priests, who move from one community to another by river, given the absence of roads. We must listen and understand the pastoral needs of the Amazon, finding solutions for evangelization to continue, above all by relying on permanent deacons to whom we must provide the necessary tools to guide their communities. Our presence must be more incisive, closer to the people and distant from the "palaces", as Pope Francis tells us.

Can you tell us a little about your background? What that led you to fill such an essential role, coordinating the Synod of Bishops and in a certain way putting into practice the great guidelines of the reforming pontificate of Francis?

My hometown is Barga di Lucca. I was ordained a priest in Pisa 54 years ago. I celebrated the 25th year of my episcopate last year, being able on that occasion to give thanks for my life, which has been a real journey around the world: in the diplomatic service of the Church, on four continents, from Guatemala to Haiti, from Paraguay to India and Nepal, then to Brazil ... it all began in 1973 and I returned to Rome in 2012, after 39 years. I served as Secretary of the Congregation for Bishops and Secretary of the College of Cardinals; I also served as Secretary in the 2013 Conclave. Pope Francis – whom I knew before his election, when I was Apostolic Nuncio in Brazil – has placed a lot of trust in me, naming me Cardinal and asking me to coordinate the Synod, knowing that I knew many Bishops, especially those of the great episcopal conferences of Brazil and India. My episcopal motto, "Itinere laeta serve domino" - which means "Walking in joy to serve the Lord" - sums up my

mission quite well: I proceed together with my confrere Bishops in a logic of collegiality, so that the Church may increasingly become a family where fraternal dialogue reigns.

Source: www.oessh.va - Interview by François Vayne

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