

## PRESENTATION

### of the Instruction

#### *The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelising mission of the Church*

*“The new Israel which while living in this present age goes in search of a future and abiding city (Hebrews 13:14), is called the Church of Christ” (Lumen Gentium 9). She is the People that God has established “which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness” (Ibid.).*

This people lives in history and in time, in the midst of which it participates in the unique salvific mission received from Christ. The members of this People respond to God's call in various ways and, as a result, assume in the Church ministries, assignments or simple tasks for the good of all. It is the People of God, therefore, who evangelise, each member according to his or her proper vocation, state in life, and concrete circumstances.

A theological reflection of this truth is found in the definition of a “Parish” according to the Code of Canon Law (can. 515, §1), wherein it speaks of “a certain community of Christ’s faithful”, made up of people with a diversity of vocations, such as priests, deacons, consecrated persons, lay people, associations and families, all of whom participate in various ways in the exercise of pastoral care, which is entrusted to a Parish Priest as its proper pastor.

On 15 August 1997, an Interdicasterial Instruction, *Ecclesia de Mystero*, “*On certain questions regarding the collaboration of the non-ordained faithful in the ministry of priests*”, was promulgated, while in 2002, the Congregation for the Clergy published an Instruction entitled, “*The Priest, Pastor and Leader of the Parish Community*” (4 August 2002).

Both documents, together with this Instruction, attempt to give an overview of the ecclesial context in which we currently find ourselves; consequently, particular attention will be given to the many forms of ministry that exist within the Parish community, in order to highlight the specificity of each in service of the singular mission of evangelisation.

One could say that the essence of the present Instruction is to recall that in the Church ‘there is a place for all and all can find their place,’ with respect to each one’s vocation, preserving the faithful from certain possible extremes, such as the clericalisation of the laity and the secularisation of the clergy, or from regarding permanent deacons as “half-priests” or a “super laymen”.

As was the case in 1997 and 2002, this Instruction does not contain “new legislation”; this is outside the remit and possibilities of an Instruction, the aim of which is to “*set out the provisions of a law and develop the manner in which it is to be put into effect*” (can. 34 §1, C.I.C.). Instead, this document proposes means to apply the law already in force in a better way, drawing on the experience of the Congregation for the Clergy in its service to the particular Churches.

The current Instruction, therefore, is intended for the benefit of certain pastoral choices, some of which pastors have already introduced and have already been “experienced” by the People of God for some time. This text aims to contribute to the evaluation of such choices, to correct and rethink them where necessary, with a view to improving upon the journey undertaken thus far, by harmonising particular law with universal law, while at the same time laying the foundations for a future path for pastoral care.

Given that the Church is mandated by Christ to be missionary, evangelising and outward looking, a reform of her structures is continuously required in order to respond to the challenges of the day. Naturally, this involves a certain reorganisation in the way the pastoral care of the faithful is exercised, so as to foster a greater co-responsibility and collaboration among all the baptised.

At the same time, the vision of the Parish community and the pastoral care proposed by the Magisterium of the Church—from the Second Vatican Council to the teaching of Pope Francis, contained in canonical norms—frequently comes to be considered as a mere opinion, at the discretion of an individual Bishop or group, often with interpretations that are improper for the life of a community and the ministry of Pastors.

One may easily think of two commonplace extremes: one the one hand, there is the Parish wherein the Parish Priest and other priests take care of everything and decide on everything themselves, relegating the other members of the community to a marginal role, at most as executors, carrying out the directives of the clergy. On the other hand, there is a sort of “democratic” vision, in which the Parish no longer has a Pastor, but simply functionaries—clerical and lay—who manage its different aspects in a way often described as “corporate”.

In addition to the Parish community being determined solely on a territorial basis and clearly distinct from neighbouring communities, the present Instruction has also sought to foster and promote, in accordance with essential canonical norms, a pastoral closeness and cooperation between different Parish communities.

To this end, the topic of grouping Parishes together—whether in “pastoral units” or Vicariates Forane, the purpose of which is “*to promote forms of integral collaboration between adjoining parishes*”, (*Apostolorum Successores*, arts. 215b; 217), or Episcopal Vicariates, also referred to as “pastoral regions” (*Ibid.*, art. 219)—is aimed at improving, especially in larger Dioceses, the connection between the “centre” and the “peripheries”. In the larger pastoral regions, the Bishop would appoint Episcopal Vicars who would have oversight for each area. They would act under the authority of the Bishop and in communion with him.

Taking the above-mentioned possibilities for diocesan restructuring into consideration, namely, the various ways of assigning and sharing in the exercise of pastoral care, the establishment of pastoral regions or units, together with the consequent union or suppression of Parishes, this Instruction is intended to offer Bishops and their collaborators, clerics and laity, the pastoral and canonical tools to work together for the greater good of the ecclesial community.

In order for such restructuring to succeed, it is necessary to take some time to respect the history, traditions and the life of different communities. *“To be part of the people is to be part of a common identity made up of social and cultural ties”*, as Pope Francis recalled (cf. Interview with Fr. Antonio Spadaro, S.J., published in 2016 in *Nelle tuoi occhi è la mia parola*). Thus, dropping plans upon the People of God from above, without their involvement, should be avoided. Instead, such proposals should proceed gradually, with patience and prudence; moreover, a preliminary consultation should be carried out, including a detailed and competent study of the situation, where different approaches are put to a trial period to test their effectiveness, before arriving at a definitive decision that is balanced and already proven in the field, in a way that does not create a rupture in the life of the community.

For this reason, this Dicastery, as requested by not a few Bishops, has felt the need to furnish an instrument with which to support and accompany the various projects of Parish reform and diocesan restructuring, some of which are already underway, whilst others are at the planning stage. The intention herein is not to stifle genuine reform through a “one size fits all” uniform approach, but rather to ensure that as a Church we go forward together, Pastors and the People of God, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Over the past number of years, this Congregation has been working on drafting this present Instruction in order to have available a theological, pastoral and canonical resource, albeit far from exhaustive, that would offer indications and general norms to be actualized in the ‘diversity’ of each ecclesial context. The goal of this Instruction is to unite, not uniformalise, as is well expressed in the words of an author dear to the heart of Pope Francis: *“The mystery of a unity that does not confuse but preserves clear distinctions, especially that between creature and God par excellence, and yet what is distinct is gathered together in a supreme inexpressible unity”* (cf. Romano Guardini, *Dostojevsky: Il mondo religioso*, p. 78).

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