
Msgr. Russo (CEI): “Responsibility curbs anti-democratic drifts.” May Rome’s local elections bring about a “sense of belonging”

“To vote, to belong and to participate are three timely verbs for a new start”, remarked the Secretary General of the Italian Bishops' Conference, Monsignor **Stefano Russo**, reflecting on the major issues marking the beginning of the New Year.

Your Excellency, the year 2019 was characterised by a political crisis resolved through the formation of a government with political forces united in an unprecedented alliance. What are your hopes for the political life of the country?

I hope there will finally be a reversal in the climate of general mistrust towards national institutions. Passion and competence can play a decisive role, combined with the identity that distinguishes our country. "The culture of responsibility - recalled the President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, in his end-of-year message - is the strongest guardian of freedom and defence of the principles underpinning the Italian Republic. This common societal awareness - when it is expressed - is reflected on the institutions so as to constantly instil a genuine republican spirit." It is also my wish that

the culture of responsibility may be the cure for “undemocratic drifts”

recorded by the latest Reports on the Country, and the path to rebuild confidence in government institutions.



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In 2021 there will see local elections in the city of Rome. Could Rome act as a driving force for the rest of Italy?

Rome's local elections - as is the case every time elections are held - can revitalize the feeling of belonging to a City and the desire to participate. Moreover, voting can stir the yearning to feel part of a community unbroken by individual desires, brought closer together by the unique bond of the common good. There ensues that,

participation in a community project becomes a fundamental drive.

The hope is that, finally, the "short-circuit" analyzed by Nando Pagnoncelli, according to whom "the more citizens show disappointment for the country, the more they seek gratification from their territory. Once they recover satisfaction, the gap between them and the rest of Italy widens. All this affects confidence in public institutions and social cohesion, both of which are critical to reform processes that everyone is calling for, but no one seems to truly want", may no longer occur.

To vote, to belong and to participate, could be three appropriate verbs for a new start.



Why has the Italian Church promoted a meeting of reflection and spirituality with all the Churches bordering on the Mediterranean in Bari, from 19 to 23 February?

The meeting follows an intuition of Cardinal President Gualtiero Bassetti. As he explained on several occasions, the event has deep roots: it embodies the prophetic vision of Giorgio La Pira who, since the late '50s, had inspired the "Mediterranean Dialogues" and anticipated the spirit that was to permeate the Second Vatican Council. Today we have the opportunity to start implementing that vision starting with the Sea that La Pira referred to as "the great Tiberias Lake."

It will not be a conference, but a meeting in the synodal style that has distinguished our ecclesial "gathering" for the past decades.

It will be a workshop of synodality, as a way of life expressed in mutual esteem, gratitude, and care for relationships. The Mediterranean Church is present and active, rich in liturgical, spiritual and ecclesiological traditions. Today we have the possibility of strengthening existing structures for communion and perhaps inventing new ones.

With regard to the rumours of a Synod of the Italian Church, is this a path that is being pursued?

I wish to recall the concluding remarks of Cardinal Anastasio Alberto Ballestrero, at the time president of the Italian Bishops' Conference, on the occasion of the second National Ecclesial Conference (Loreto, 9-13 April 1985), on the theme "Christian reconciliation and the community of humanity." He stated, almost prophetically, anticipating the claims made in the following years: "The Conference revealed an ecclesial way of life. Why not then say that coming together is an ecclesial way of life

and that we wish to experience these Conferences not only as circumstances conducive to saying and doing something, but as essential dimensions of Church life?

A community that does not come together is not a community.

That's why I am saying that the Italian Church is learning to convene, to congregate. There are many ways of coming together. Some are solemn, I would say historical: these are the great Councils of the Church. Then there are the Synods, as also meetings requested by the various bodies of the local Churches. However, also convening in this way, whereby the dimension of the people, the plenary and organic dimension of the community emerges and becomes explicit, is an achievement that enriches the experience of the Church." The experience of "gathering together", marking the life of the Italian Church for the past fifty years, is for us all a spiritual grace and a pastoral style.

"Synodal" is a style, a way of life, "coming together", ingrained in deep-rooted motivations.



The year 2019 was marked by widespread consciousness of climate change, with thousands of young people taking to the streets worldwide. Is the climate issue a matter of concern to the Church?

It certainly is and, in a certain way, the Italian Church has been ahead of the times: the National Day for the Care of Creation has been celebrated for the past fifteen years. I see that from the young emerges

not just a fleeting commitment, but a genuine plea which can act as the ideal grounds for a cross-generational dialogue to recompose society and reconcile it in all its facets.

Moreover - as the Holy Father reminds us in the Encyclical *Laudato si* - the environmental crisis requires a far-reaching, integral approach that includes the human and social dimensions. It is a question of developing virtuous projects that highlight the need to raise public awareness on the joint responsibility for our surrounding environment.

Various forms of hatred are escalating throughout the world, often leading to dramatic incidents. How should we interpret our present times?

Any person with common sense and openness towards others cannot but be concerned about the escalation of all forms of hatred. The sequence of such tragic events is destroying the very sense of humanity. This is not about religious beliefs. What is being questioned is the concept of humanity. Who are you to me? Who is my brother? At a deeper level, who am I? Underestimating hate speech and all forms of viciousness, more or less hidden, is what worries me. I'm worried about the evil that is spreading in our societies. I am concerned about the wounds and tears caused by every attack. These are never-ending tragedies which perhaps are not sufficiently acknowledged. The momentary shock fades away, the worry remains. Maybe,

the time has come for a large-scale global movement to eradicate all forms of hatred.

So I hope that the New Year will usher in this global change.



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2020 is also Brexit year. A defeat for Europe?

This is certainly no good news. The long road to European unity has brought peace to our peoples, acting as a necessary backdrop for decades of democracy, rights and economic and social growth. If this unity collapses, it means that something went wrong. The British people's decision to leave the European Union is legitimate and must be respected: looking ahead we need to build a new partnership, one that sees the EU and the UK close and cooperative for the good of their peoples. I wish to emphasise one more thing:

Brexit should be seen by EU Member States as a signal calling for national rethinking.

Perhaps it is time to consider whether reforms are needed to make EU institutions more efficient and democratic, and to bring the citizens closer to the great project of European unity.

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