

Continental European Synod of Bishops on Synodality, Prague 5-9 February 2023

Reflections by Fr. Jānis Meļņikovs, President of UCESM

UCESM was invited to participate as guests in the Continental Synod of Bishops on Synodality, represented by the President, Fr. Jānis Meļņikovs sj, and the Vice President, Sr. Olena Bys csa. This invitation from the European Bishops' Conference to represent the consecrated at the Synod expresses the desire to include the consecrated in such discussions. It recognises that the consecrated life is a vital ministry in the Church. Much to our delight many Bishops' Conferences were represented by Religious delegates.

It was a great joy to experience that the European Bishops' Conference appreciated the involvement of the contemplative communities in praying for this synodal process. One hundred forty communities from different European countries participated in this prayer organized by UCESM.

Such a synod was a new and precious experience for everyone personally because it was an opportunity to see the universal Church and how it works at the parish, diocesan and continental levels, to get an idea of a genuinely universal Church in the diversity of the faithful, in various languages and cultures. But secondly, such a gathering was valuable for the Church because it shows the Church's desire to always be with and serve people. It points to the truth, already written about by the Second Vatican Council, that the Church is made up of all people who believe in Christ, not just the hierarchy, but all the laity, men, women, and consecrated priests, who are called to take their share of responsibility over the Church. This shows that the Church is interested in the joys and sorrows, the cares and concerns of people and walks with people, being present in these human realities. Many recognised the necessity of such a process and the need to cultivate it, to receive formation in this synodal process and to adopt it as a fundamental attitude of the Church.

In Prague, it was evident that people wanted to talk, share, listen and engage in such a synodal way. That people, as bishops, clergy, consecrated religious persons and laity, care about the Church and respond openly to the Pope's call to walk this synodal path. It was also striking to see the great diversity of views and experiences with which the European continent lives. And at the same time, seeing the process, the mutual conversations, the sharing, the listening, the fantastic awareness that God is with us and He is guiding us because there is no other way that something like this could happen. This is especially true because at the Synod, some countries were at war with each other, Ukraine and Russia, and the devastating earthquake in Turkey and Syria shook everyone. They recognise secularising societies in Eastern Europe and old Europe and the different responses to similar experiences and challenges. This and much else that Europe lives with was not too much of a barrier for the European Church to come together and talk respectfully.

In the working groups' discussions, it also emerged that the Religious have valuable experiences for the whole Church regarding accepting and respecting diversity. The communities of the consecrated are like microcosms of the Church in which people learn to accept each other, respect, and include. In this sense, the consecrated have experience and knowledge to share and teach. This is not to say that the consecrated are superior in any way, but only to point out that communities are a school that leads people to be more merciful, tolerant, open and inclusive, perhaps because of many imperfections and human frailties to live with.

The synodal process in Prague made us feel like we were on the path of spiritual and institutional growth that, at the time, might feel uncomfortable and insecure. And at the same time calling to draw upon our hopes and dreams instead of fears.