

## ELF FULL STUDY ASSEMBLY - 9th-12th JUNE 2022 held in Madrid

Fourteen out of the seventeen countries that make up the European Forum of National Laity Committees (ELF) were represented by the 50+ attenders at the Full Study Assembly held at Santa Maria de los Negrals, 30 minutes outside Madrid.



The theme for the Study Assembly had been agreed at the zoomed Presidents' meeting in 2019 - "Daily life is all we have how do we live as Christians in today's society?" - when it was intended to hold the Study Assembly in 2020. With the postponement until 2022 due to Covid, along with the Pope's calling of a Synod for 2023 which involved the laity in its preparation, it was agreed to try and deal with both themes while in Madrid.

Professor Elisa Estevez from the Pontifical University of Comillas, Madrid, a guest speaker and facilitator for the assembly took the first question as the subject of her presentation. She started by saying that "the question, 'How do we live as Christians in today's society?' resonates today in a context marked globally by the effects of the pandemic and recently by the war in Ukraine. We have awoken from the dream of omnipotence. Uncertainty has crept into our everyday spaces and the awareness of our vulnerability introduces for us an unprecedented way of becoming human, more human. On the other hand, the ecclesial context, characterized by the movement towards a synodal Church, invites us to recreate communion, participation, and mission, strengthening listening, participation and inclusion of all, discernment, etc."



In her lecture she suggested some clues that can illuminate our commitment as citizens and believers in communion with "the joy and hope, the sadness and anguish of the men and women of our time, especially the poor and all the afflicted" and guided by the Spirit in the pilgrimage towards the Kingdom of God (Gaudium et Spes 1).

She divided her speech into three main sections:

1) to grow in an intense contemplative sensitivity in daily life;

- 2) to be witnesses of an extraordinary distinctiveness;
- 3) to be communities that discern the passage of God in history.

She set the following for discussion and reflection:

1) How do we expose ourselves to the gaze of others who are vulnerable and, in a special way, of those whose dignity and rights have been violated?

How do we cultivate a contemplative sensitivity that allows itself to be moved by pain, injustice, oppression... and allows the stories of flesh and blood people to enter into its consciousness and affect its whole being?

2) How do we show by our actions that we resist lifestyles that dislocate, wound and disintegrate us, causing suffering and death, and instead affirming others that regenerate life and sustain it, the expression of a different citizenship ("if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above", Col 3:1-2)?

How can we live and grow by generating and strengthening networks of reciprocity and interdependence? How can we create a different culture that leads to caring for one another, both in close relationships and in social, economic and political relationships (Fratelli tutti 181)? How can we move in our daily lives and in our communities and projects towards an "ecological conversion"?

3) How does discernment in common contribute to unfolding essential dimensions of witnessing to the gospel today?

What steps do we need to take to be communities that habitually discern in common what God wants?



Rev. Fr Michael Conway from Maynooth University, lecturer in pastoral Theology explored "Synodality" in four steps:

1) Why Synodality? Why now? What we are leaving behind us in terms of being a structured community. The crucial issue of how power dynamics were understood and lived out in traditional ecclesial settings.

2) Synodality. It's basic meaning and some of its implications. Safeguarding. The vitality that goes with participation and co-responsibility.

3) Synodality and Leadership. Decentralization. A reappraisal of hierarchy in the Church. The dynamics of communication.

4) Living Synodality. Decision-Making in the Church. How is ecclesial decision-making to reflect a genuine Synodality? How are we to get beyond mere documents and words?

He set the assembly the challenge to work in a synodal way in their discussions, shared reflections and time together during the assembly. He posed the following Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1) About thirty years ago as a hospital chaplain, I suggested to the team of chaplains (all priests) that lay persons might assist us with distributing communion in the hospital. I had an extremely negative re-action to the suggestion and was told, in no uncertain terms,

that this would not be possible. Now, many years later it is de facto lay persons, who distribute communion in that same hospital. Have you had (or witnessed) a similar experience? Where have you seen unexpected change? Discuss the energy that goes with change? What does hindsight tell us about change?

2) Where do you see the dynamics of Synodality at work in the wider culture (even if the word is not used)? What can we learn from other places in society, when it comes to building up community in a synodal fashion? What about leadership? Have you had a particularly positive experience of leadership? What are the characteristic features of good leadership?

3) What does co-responsibility mean? Are you ready to take on more responsibility? Could you suggest some areas, where taking on more responsibility might be possible?

4) There is an expression of Church that is slowly being left behind in our culture. What loss to you see? What gain do you see in this loss? How are we in a better place in terms of living out the gospel in Christian community? Where is your hope?

A further input to the assembly was by way of three testimonials sharing how membership of a lay association had helped them on their faith journey. The first was given by a lay person who had been involved in the Spanish synod preparation consultations. He stated that there were over 3million catholics in Spain and approximately 5 thousand had taken part in these discussions. They came from various special groups: politicians, workers unions, teachers, university lecturers and directors from 15 sifferent universities. He stressed that there was a need to know the name of those excluded or on the periphery. The church should welcome christian communities including divorced and those of different sexual orientations.



The second testimony came from a member of the Christian Life Community movement, of which there were over 1400 members in Spain and approximately 180 in Madrid. The different small groups consisted of upto ten members - people of different place and spiritual backgrounds, with great variety able to learn and pray with different people. Through her membership she had dicovered that “God loves me as I am”. She gave a resume of her life history and journey of faith, including moving from feelings of guilt and fear upto 18 years of age, to realising how God was leading her life. After University she spent time in El Salvador, experiencing Liberation Theology, which had an important affect on her life. Now married with two children - a family and home of love. She looks for God in all who suffer. She is a professor and her involvement with students gives her optimism for the future.

The third testimonial came from a member of the Scout Movement. She came from a religious family who were not involved in community. She said that religion had been irrelevant. But she gave a committment to take part in something, the scout movement, where members had fun and were committed to their faith and to the service they do in their community.

Have to discover oneself - related what happened when her mother died, and how a priest at the school had helped her through her bitterness and questioning of why?

Now realises the importance of prayer, not being alone. Our faith should not be boring - we have to be involved and useful to our community and the people around us.

Following group discussions and sharing reflections in plenary sessions the attached Study Assembly Statement - "For a compassionate Church" and the European Lay Forum Synod 2023 response document were prepared and presented to the Full Assembly.

Following the Study Assembly these documents were sent to:

the General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops

the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life

the Commission of the European Episcopal Conferences (COMECE)

the Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE)

and all the lay forums within the European Lay Forum.

Whilst in Madrid, the Statutory Assembly also took place which included presentation of the annual report, financial report and elections. Due to the covid restrictions and inability



to meet as a forum, with regard to elections, it was agreed by the Full Assembly that the officers and members of the steering group continue in post until 2024.

The Presidents Council and General Assembly of ELFe.v. also took place on the Saturday. Cardinal Carlos Osoro Sierra celebrated Mass in the chapel, and joined the group for evening meal and informal discussions.

