

## Welcome Address by H.L. Bishop Mario Grech

President of the Maltese Episcopal Conference

It is my pleasure to convey this short message of welcome to all scholars and guests participating in today's Conference. Our getting together aims at contributing towards the ongoing reflections that are taking place in this period between the two Synods concerning the cultural and emerging pastoral challenges of marriage and the family in Europe. A special greeting goes to the six speakers who will help us reflect through their valid contributions.

As a bishop, I would also like to express my gratitude and appreciation to the theologians gathered here today, for all your sterling work. It is your vocation, in communion with the Magisterium, to acquire “an ever deeper understanding of the Word of God found in the inspired Scriptures and handed over by the living Tradition of the Church.”<sup>1</sup> This Conference is a step in the right direction to support our brethen with the light of that Truth that sets us free, and enlightens the Church to preach the Gospel of joy and compassion. Your theological investigation is pivotal in order to address the challenges facing marital life and the family, because what the Church needs in its next *synodus* (a coming together) is to provide new answers that are rooted in the Word of God, faithful to the Tradition of the Church, and *creative*. It is of little use to come together just to repeat what is already known. Deep theological reflection is required in the Church because, as Vatican Council II states, this enhances “the growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down” (*Dei Verbum*, no. 8).

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<sup>1</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian *Donum veritatis*, no. 6.

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However in order to provide *concrete answers* we must be in touch with the *concrete* experience of our families. Thus, as a starting point for the Conference, I commend that we should focus on the *concrete experience* of the challenges facing marriage and family in our continent. We need to look attentively and compassionately at the situations families are finding themselves in today. Allow me to quote what I have already expressed during the last Synod: “*Creativity* in both the language as well as in the pastoral attitude towards persons who find themselves in difficult pastoral situations requires far more than a mere external modification. On the contrary, it demands the sustained pursuit of new answers alongside new pastoral approaches some of which can be extracted from the teachings of the Church Fathers. It is desirable that such situations be closely examined with *theological erudition together with a pastoral mind-set*, in order for suitable pastoral solutions that are built upon deepened doctrinal considerations to be obtained.”

Some fear that this synodal experience could shake the solid foundations of the Church’s teaching on marriage and the family. I think that what we ought to fear is our resistance to the Holy Spirit who guides the Church: a fear that should be felt by all those who love Christ and His Church – that *timor Domini* which constitutes the *initium sapientiae* (Ps 111:10). We all should, in front of God, examine our conscience to remain always rooted in the Lord and let our reflections and proposals be guided by a sincere and true love for Him and for His Church.

Reflecting upon this moment in the history of the Church, it is my impression that this synodal experience is not just about marriage and the family, but about the Church itself and how we are to live our calling to be brothers and sisters in Christ. This fraternal charity will help us live by the Pauline axiom *maior est caritas*: love should prevail above all things (1 Cor 13:13). So this Conference is not just an “academic” moment, but a *fraternal gathering* of brothers and sisters who love Christ and are willing to serve Him. I am not scared by a Church that as a family questions itself about how to preach the Gospel in today’s world. I am scared by a Church that stops short from continuing her journey under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to arrive at an ever new and fuller understanding of truth. So, your presence here today is both encouraging and consoling. We need to move ahead with courage and creativity.

We should all therefore invoke upon our Church the Spirit of Truth who is also the Spirit of Love and of Communion. It saddens me when I meet priests and lay people who have a profound love and dedication towards the Lord and His Church, and tell me that they feel confused and disorientated by the theological reflection and discussion that are taking place regarding the pastoral

challenges concerning the family. I confess that sometimes such disorientation is due to a vision of a Church divided into two opposing poles: the “conservatives” and the “progressives” who mutually accuse one another of being wrong and false in their assertions. While recalling to mind the temptations, earmarked by Pope Francis in his final address at the conclusion of the 2014 Extraordinary Synod, concerning both the so-called conservatives and progressives, we should avoid “pigeonholing” one another through divisive labels. Instead, we must all strive to be truly faithful to Christ Our Lord and His Church while progressing in our journey in the world. In other words, what I would like to stress is that falling into compromise with current and populist trends is one thing, and ought to be avoided, whereas being faithful to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit is something else, something that is not only praiseworthy but necessary for the fulfilment our mission of proclaiming the Gospel to all humanity.

As His Holiness states: “The Church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 114). A merciful Church is one that makes it possible for all to experience the redeeming love of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Some may retain this emphasis on mercy as a sign of a Church that is becoming “sentimental,” and rendering blurred her vision of what is true and good. However, a merciful Church is one that conveys the Truth, and whose heart is bruised by love for humankind. Mercy does not make the Church vulnerable but credible, because it is only that Church which is *wounded out of love* that can truly bear witness to the *wounded heart of her master Jesus Christ*. Pope Francis, again, clearly states: “I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurt and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and clinging to its own security” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 49). True mercy, far from being “laxist,” is what humanity, and in particular our families, are thirsting for to encounter their one Lord and Saviour.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the Faculty of Theology at the University of Malta and the European Society of Catholic Theologians for organizing this Conference, and Her Excellency the President of Malta for supporting this event.