



# DIOCESI DI BERGAMO

## **WALKING TOGETHER IN THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL**

Circular letter of Bishop Francesco  
for the pastoral year 2016-2017

# 13 WALKING TOGETHER IN THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL

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## Dear sisters and brothers,

A **“circular letter”** does not begin with appellations like these, rather it evokes impersonal, essential, practical documents. This year I thought of writing you a circular letter, without the characteristics of impersonality, but with a little of essential practicality.

The reason for this choice is instructed by the last vicariate visit but not yet concluded and from some needs that I have gathered over the course of this last “journey” in the diocese.

I hope that the proposals contained in this “circular” can arouse your interest and start a process of sharing nourished by the faith and friendly belonging to our Christian community.

## THE HORIZON

The horizon of this process is represented by the **Apostolic Exhortation “Evangelii Gaudium” by Pope Francis.**

In the Ecclesiastical Convention in Florence last November, he showed to all the Christian communities in Italy the task of deepening this text considered programmatic for his service and for the mission of the Church:

*“Although it is not for me to say how to accomplish this dream today, allow me to leave you just one indication for the coming years: in every community, in every parish and institution, in every diocese and circumscription, in every region, try to launch, in a synodal fashion, a deep reflection on the Evangelii Gaudium, to draw from it practical parameters and to launch its dispositions, especially on the three or four priorities that you will identify in this meeting”.*

Among the basic directions of the Pope’s Letter, I wish to particularly share these:

- rediscover the joy of the Gospel and its proclamation;
- coming out of the boundaries of a reassuring faith and a turned down communities and reach out to every human person in his freedom, in his depth, in his suffering;
- recognise the figure of the poor in the face of Christ who incites us and evangelises us;
- adopt a style of personal and communal Christian life capable of communicating the charm of the Gospel and nourishing the fraternity among human persons.

## THE ICON

The evangelical image that unifies the horizon outlined by the Pope's letter and the path that we propose is that of the **disciples of Emmaus**. I am not pausing for commenting on it, inviting each and every community to identify the most effective way to use the "cards" prepared for the catechetical journey of this year.

*The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew." (EG 1).*

In these words that open the Pope's letter, we find a summary of the experience of the disciples of Emmaus and the narration of what happens in the life of a woman and a man who are open to the Gospel.

## THE VICARIATE VISIT

We begin from the vicariate visit: it is the fifth that I have carried out in these seven years and it is aimed at pastoral charity workers in different spheres of life: from family to work, from fragility to culture, from politics to volunteering.

**The five vicariate visits** have allowed me to meet with a certain readiness the face and the experience of the Church that lives in Bergamo and to establish relationships which, even if limited, have enriched me with feelings of wonder, gratitude and hope.

With wonder for the richness and strength of our communities and of their faith; of gratitude for the testimony and for the dedication of priests, religious and lay people; of hope for an endurance that despite the evident secularism of mentality and of life, it manifests itself in the widespread presence of our parishes, in a still large number of priests, in the care not only of our external traditions, in a personal generosity and organized beyond imagination, in a firm organization and wide-ranging, in the presence of many social and cultural initiatives and in the beauty of churches and works of art. Particularly, this fifth visit has allowed me to meet priests, religious and lay people around the fascinating experience of charity.

L'esito di questi incontri, non conclusivo, ma già ben delineato, può essere raccolto attorno ad alcune **considerations**:

- the quantitative prominence of the parish and vicariate proposals with regard to solidarity and closeness to the different dimensions of existence;
- the strength of the dedication and real encounter with women and men of all backgrounds, in the sign of the personal and personalizing relationship;
- the variety of initiatives of which our communities are capable;
- the thickness of unorganised everyday actions;
- the intelligence and preparation of many in the pastoral and existential environments in which they operate;
- the appreciated presence, sometimes taken for granted, exploited or criticized, in different institutions.

The aspects which require a **renewed focus** are:

- the formation and self-training of those who work;

- the generativity of our works and relationship with the "territory";
- the evangelizing dimension of charity;
- the different forms of charity in various areas of life, in a context marked by problem of aging and the future, by the change of work in the world, by weak and limited planning, by individualist dynamics.

I pause a moment on the **perspective of generativity**.

We live in a context that has favoured the production and mortified the generation: an emblematic sign is the tremendous demographic decline in many countries, including Italy itself. Production, which is necessary, has as its result the product; generation has as its result the fruit of life. We ascertain every day that products are not missing, but what is missing is the sense and the taste of life.

The pastoral care is also exposed to this risk: it multiplies products, proposals, initiatives, but suffers from spiritual and communal sterility.

It seems necessary to me to find the conditions for a generativity of our communities, being aware that the experience of faith in Christ is capable of this.

**The guidelines** that arise from these meetings are:

- the treatment of the proposals, with particular attention to the quality of personal relationships;
- the prospect of a pastoral work that considers human existence in its unity, favouring an approach outlined by areas of life indicated in the Verona Convention;
- the recognition and promotion of the dignity and responsibility of the laity;
- the awareness of the importance of the educational dimension in all its forms, initiatives and proposals of the community;
- the awareness of the evangelizing value of our personal and communitarian actions, so that the Gospel may reach the heart and the “periphery” of everyone’s life.
- the sharing of perspectives and paths with the “territory” in the variety and richness of its expressions and institutions;
- the recognition and promotion of the subjectivity of the poor.

It is simply an index that introduces the proposal that I intend to submit to you.

*“This is why I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us. Not only do they share in the sensus fidei, but in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them. The new evangelization is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the centre of the Church’s pilgrim way. We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them.” (EG 198).*

## THE REFORM OF VICARIATES

During this latest visit, I felt, growing and becoming definite in a manner increasingly clear, **the need for reconsideration and a relaunch of local vicariates.**

The history and the definition of local vicariates, deserves to be examined in depth to grasp the reasons and the ways in which they were made.

The current situation is characterized by the presence of twenty-eight local vicariates. Each vicariate is headed by a local vicar appointed by the Bishop; the intended entities are the vicariate presbyteral council and vicariate pastoral council. The boundaries and purpose of the Vicariate and the responsibility of the local vicar are defined by the Bishop and recently re-proposed by the Diocesan Synod.

Starting from the Council the appearance of the Vicariate assumes more and more the characteristics of the pastoral commitment in relation to the **"territory"**, understood as together vital and representative of the worlds and their interactions; for this very reason it becomes the ecclesial place where the vocation and mission of the laity and their co-responsibility is significantly expressed.

The Vicariate becomes a concrete condition for the promotion and coordination of a shared ministry.

The initial situation marked by fervour and hope has gradually weakened for the **reasons** that I mention roughly here: the loss of participatory thrust at all levels; the heaviness and the feeling of worthlessness of pastoral organisations; the weakness of the Vicariate towards the Parish and the figure of the parish priest; the birth of the pastoral unities and the feeling of an unbearable multiplication of ecclesial structures; the retreat onto internal dynamics within the Christian community; the difficulty to express in a generative way the relationship among Christian communities, civil society, contemporary history; the loss of the presence of the laypeople at a level of programmatic responsibilities; the difficulty to support the initial purpose of the Vicariate in front of the decrease and aging of the clergy and even of the laity. A signal in this sense is represented by the fact that about half of the local Vicariates has not established and no longer feels the need of the Vicariate Pastoral Council. The aforementioned reasons require a reform of this ecclesial structure.

*"The Church's closeness to Jesus is part of a common journey; communion and mission are profoundly interconnected". In fidelity to the example of the Master, it is vitally important for the Church today to go forth and preach the Gospel to all: to all places, on all occasions, without hesitation, reluctance or fear. The joy of the Gospel is for all people: no one can be excluded." (EG 23).*

It is a matter of pursuing **four pastoral purposes**:

- to promote and nurture the relationship with the “territory”, taking as a reference the five **areas** indicated by the Verona Ecclesial Convention: work and feast days, human weakness, citizenship, tradition, love life;
- encourage and acknowledge the **shared responsibility** of the laity starting from their expertise in the aforementioned fields;
- support a qualified **formation** of pastoral workers;
- outline some forms of **pastoral agreement** in the area of interest of the Vicariate.

The horizon of the reform is outlined by the perspective of evangelisation and evangelical service of the Church to every human person; the acknowledge by the priestly ministry, the lay vocation, both personal and communal, the testimony of consecrated life and the different charisms, in their proper connotations; by the collaboration between the different ecclesial subjects from the perspective of forms of encounter, dialogue and synergy with the institutional, social and cultural subjects present in the territory.

The reform considers the definition of larger vicariates, which will take on the name of **“territorial vicariates”**.

The bigger sizes are not simply the widening of the existing Vicariates, but expression of geographical and historical consistency and especially social and cultural relevance: they concretely represent the condition that allows to pursue more effectively the specified purpose.

The structure of the Vicariate is composed of parishes, the pastoral units, the priestly fraternity, the community of consecrated life and the lay groups present in that territory.

The organisms that give shape to the Vicariate form are: the territorial pastoral council, the council of priests, the local vicar.

## THE CONSTITUTION OF THE PRIESTLY FRATERNITY

The brief description of the reform of vicariates, highlights two aspects of great importance: the projection of territorial vicariate in the direction of existential, social and cultural perspective defined by the five areas of Verona; the promotion of lay responsibility in relation to this figure of the Vicariate.

Among the most considerable consequences of these choices we can include the establishment of a single Vicariate Council: **the Territorial Pastoral Council**, whose composition and purpose will be described on another occasion.

The quantitative expansion of the Vicariate and its new skills pose anew the question of the figure and mission of the presbyter and particularly the presbytery in its local form.

Every ordained priest enters a special bond with the bishop and with other priests. The Council has highlighted very strongly this membership and in the past decades we have tried to concretely manifest it in different ways.

Now, on the occasion of this reform, it is necessary to relaunch it through a relatively new figure: that of the **"priestly fraternity"**. It is primarily a lifestyle that characterises the entire Christian community and that Pope Francis has recently referred to as the Christian response to the fragmentation, divisions, hostilities and wars of our time.

*"Today, when the networks and means of human communication have made unprecedented advances, we sense the challenge of finding and sharing a "mystique" of living together, of mingling and encounter, of embracing and supporting one another, of stepping into this flood tide which, while chaotic, can become a genuine experience of fraternity, a caravan of solidarity, a sacred pilgrimage." (EG 87).*

*"There indeed we find true healing, since the way to relate to others which truly heals instead of debilitating us, is a mystical fraternity, a contemplative fraternity. It is a fraternal love capable of seeing the sacred grandeur of our neighbor, of finding God in every human being, of tolerating the nuisances of life in common by clinging to the love of God, of opening the heart to divine love and seeking the happiness of others just as their heavenly Father does. Here and now, especially where we are a "little flock" (Lk 12:32), the Lord's disciples are called to live as a community which is the salt of the earth and the light of the world (cf. Mt 5:13-16). We are called to bear witness to a constantly new way of living together in fidelity to the Gospel. Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of community!" (EG 92).*

I remind you with discretion that I myself have dedicated to the theme of brotherhood the pastoral letter of 2012.

The Italian Bishops, reflecting on the life of the priest and the discernment of the vocation to this ministry, have recently highlighted how crucial the dimension of fraternity is, indicated as necessary mode of pastoral ministry and not simply as “oasis” of spiritual regeneration for some. It is necessary to propose favourable conditions for an ecclesial renewal of **“priestly fraternity”** as a lifestyle.

But this expression does not only indicate a style: as part of the Vicariate reform, it becomes indicative of a concrete way to establish the relationships between priests who live in the same territory. Given the size that takes the proposed territorial vicariate, it becomes necessary to reformulate the relationship between priests and focusing on the relational dimensions.

The “priestly fraternity” consists of challenging relationships between a limited number of priests (about twenty), living and working in parishes nearby, and is nourished by a series of shared commitments that are well-defined by themselves, by the diocesan presbytery as a whole and by the Bishop. Already today the presbyter of a Vicariate lives these relations, often connoted by shared choices and pastoral duties. Now it is time to accentuate these relational aspects in the perspective of a new mode of pastoral service.

The “priestly fraternity” thus takes the form of a group of priests who are living meaningful relationships with each other, becoming a sign and testimony of a far-reaching fraternity that embraces the entire community: it is not therefore a closed and exclusive fraternity, rather a sign and fermentation that nourishes the relations of the whole community.

Particularly, the “priestly fraternity” aims to nurture the nourishment of the faith of the priest and his pastoral skills, the experience of the grace of ministry, a lifestyle in which the Communitarian perspective can emerge significantly, the sharing of ‘pastoral commitment’.

It is a matter, during this year, of defining the purpose of the priestly fraternity, the manner of their constitution, and the conditions of their existence, in light of these indications.

The “priestly fraternity” will not be a parallel church structure or an alternative to territorial vicariate; in each Vicariate there will be more “priestly fraternities”; each fraternity will include the figure of a “president” or “first among equals” we might call **“the moderator of fraternity”**.

The history of many experiences already lived and that of diocesan priestly community enrich this process.

## A JOURNEY IN THE SIGN OF SHARING

The considerations which I have submitted represent the start of a journey that engages communities and the priests and becomes representative of a style in which the fraternal relations and the passion for the proclamation of the Gospel are not only the outcome, but the form itself of the process that we are starting.

I believe that the Bishop in person must accompany and be accompanied significantly to this path. It is a challenging two-year journey for me, the communities and priests, which I will now submit. For reasons of clear perspective I am presenting two distinct, but not distant paths.

**The first path is related  
to the "Vicariate reform".**

### 2016-2017 pastoral year

- *Diocesan Assembly in September*: Presentation of the circular letter.
- *Pastoral Council vicar*: in the months of November and January, deepening of the reasons, purposes and characteristics of the Vicariate reform. In the months of March and May, elaboration of a "working instrument" for the reform and its implementation and preliminary definition of the boundaries of the territorial vicariates.

### 2017-2018 pastoral year

- *Diocesan Assembly in September*: presentation of the annual journey.
- *Meetings of parish pastoral councils divided into the provisional territorial vicariates*: in the months of November, January and March, deepening the "working instrument" in relation to the tasks and composition of the Territorial Pastoral Council, the figure of the local vicar and other figures; the electoral rules. In May elections of the territorial pastoral council and the appointment of the territorial Vicar
- *Diocesan Assembly in September*: presentation of the pastoral letter for the year 2018-2019 to territorial pastoral councils.

\* \* \*

The Bishop will be present once in each Vicariate both the first and the second pastoral year. The journey will be accompanied by aiding documents and by people committed to this.

## The second path is related to the “priestly fraternity”

### 2016-2017 pastoral year

- *priestly Assembly in September on the theme “presbytery and fraternity.”*
- *vicariate presbyteral councils:* during the meetings of the pastoral year, deepening of the reasons for the Reform of the Vicariates and the relationship between priestly fraternity and Christian community; elaboration of a working tool for the reform of the Vicariates and a working tool for the priestly brotherhood, preliminary definition of the boundaries of the territorial vicariates and composition of priestly fraternity.
- *priestly Assembly in June: presentation of the itinerary of the year 2017-2018.*

### 2017-2018 pastoral year

- *priestly Assembly in September:* Presentation of the working tool for the reform of the Vicariates and priestly fraternity.
- *Vicariate presbyteral council:* during the meetings of the pastoral year, deepening of the working instrument in order to reform the Vicariates and priestly fraternity; definition of the composition of priestly fraternity and definition of the moderator.
- *Election of the territorial pastoral council and appointment of Territorial Vicar in May.*
- *Election of the Diocesan presbyteral Council in June.*
- *Assembly of priests in June: presentation of the pastoral letter for the year 2018-2019 and launch of priestly fraternity.*

\* \* \*

The Bishop will be present once in every vicariate presbyteral council in both the first and second pastoral year. The journey will be accompanied by subsidies and by people dedicated to this.

As you can verify it is a difficult path that aims to nourish a not merely formal and structural sharing, but above all to make a widespread ecclesial consciousness grow regarding the mission of the Church and brotherhood as a way of life.

We will not neglect the themes that in the past three years we have set to ourselves and the daily life of our ecclesial communities.

In this horizon I wish to deliver a decision to you that seems to me inescapable: to be able to accompany this process and above all nourish the meaningful sharing with all the situations of our Diocese, **we must necessarily defer and reconsider the planned pastoral visit and the manner to realize it.**

\* \* \*

I conclude this letter, subjecting **two themes that accompany the indicated path.**

## AMORIS LAETITIA

I desire to manifest to you some reflections that open up to a more challenging and prolonged walk. The letter of the Pope delivers to the Church and to humanity the beauty and the value of family.

A careful reading is necessary and the text is assimilated in its entirety at a personal and communitarian level.

As for married couples and families, as well as people living in delicate situations from the point of view of marriage and family, the basic criteria and inseparable that characterise the pastoral activity of the Church in the name of mercy, are those **of accompanying, the evangelical discernment and integration.**

The evangelical discernment is needed on many aspects of conjugal and family life, which today take on personal characteristics particularly marked: in this horizon also are the delicate situations from the point of view of marriage and family.

The Evangelical discernment foresees as principal subjects the same people who live marital and family condition in the many forms that today take on: under this profile the importance of the conscience of everyone and for its formation appears evident.

The Evangelical discernment also requires the confrontation with a spiritual guide, often recognised in the figure of the priest, as regards of his responsibility towards the community entrusted to him, both in his ministry as announcer of the Word and servant of the merciful grace of God.

The Evangelical discernment draws on faith, prayer, action of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, to the Church, the pastoral orientations of the Bishop always provides a "journey" of faith and conversion.

At this moment I ask, particularly the priests, to act with **prudence and patience**, avoiding establishing criteria, while shared guidelines are maturing, in order to avoid exposing the people of God and every person to choices that confuse for their multiplicity and that can be contradicted by the indications that will come to fruition: both with regard to the personal situation of the faith, and as regards tasks and community responsibilities.

To formulate these guidelines I desire to engage with me, the diocesan pastoral organizations and a group of persons particularly competent in family ministry, so that they can conclude their work by the end of this year.

## "SOWING" YOUNG

With a significant number of young people, many of them in their twenties and the thirties, I shared the participation in the World Youth Day celebrated in Krakow. With particular joy we heard resound in Pope Francis' speeches the word **"sowing"** and we recognized in him and in his gestures the image of the sower. In his strong words this double condition emerges clearly: the young are at the same time "field" to sow the Gospel and "sower" of the Gospel.

For over a year I asked those who are more directly involved in youth ministry to launch a process that raises the relationship between the Gospel, faith and young people in their **twenties-thirties**. It is a period of life in which they live among the most beautiful and decisive experiences. For various reasons it seems that this is also the moment of the most pronounced gap between the Christian community and the young generation. I do not believe that we can give up, awaiting a return that will happen in another moments of existence. At the same time I would not like that too quickly we are to define initiatives, proposals, paths that, if too structured, they risk to exhaust themselves.

I believe that the image of the sowing is strongly generative and dynamic and can enrich with a variety of contributions.

**Some criteria that can inspire** this “sowing” are:

- listening, appreciation of the richness of the experience of young people in which the youth recognize the seed of the Gospel;
- the Community dimension of dynamism that is enriched with so many plurality;
- the cultivation and accompanying in the name of freedom of young people with whom we share a journey;
- the trust of adults and educators toward them and promoting their responsibilities;
- the sharing of the Gospel in existential land of their age;
- the direct proposal of Jesus and His Gospel;
- attention to the “spiritual” dimension, anything but not far away from them;
- serious consideration of the vocation dimension of life, particularly in the time of youth.

The reinterpretation of the intense messages of World Youth Day can nourish the dynamism of this “sowing”.

## CONCLUSIONE

La lettera **“Evangelii Gaudium”** rappresenta la fonte che ispira questo cammino.

Non si tratta di un’operazione organizzativa, che poteva essere realizzata in tempi molto più brevi: piuttosto si tratta della possibilità di far diventare una concreta riforma strutturale, l’occasione di un ripensamento condiviso che favorisca la conversione ecclesiale alla quale la nostra Comunità diocesana non vuole sottrarsi.

*“Il Concilio Vaticano II ha presentato la conversione ecclesiale come l’apertura a una permanente riforma di sé per fedeltà a Gesù Cristo: «Ogni rinnovamento della Chiesa consiste essenzialmente in un’accreciuta fedeltà alla sua vocazione [...]»*

*La Chiesa peregrinante verso la meta è chiamata da Cristo a questa continua riforma, di cui essa, in quanto istituzione umana e terrena, ha sempre bisogno». Ci sono strutture ecclesiali che possono arrivare a condizionare un dinamismo evangelizzatore; ugualmente, le buone strutture servono quando c’è una vita che le anima, le sostiene e le giudica. Senza vita nuova e autentico spirito evangelico, senza «fedeltà della Chiesa alla propria vocazione», qualsiasi nuova struttura si corrompe in poco tempo” (EG 26).*

## Care sorelle e fratelli,

Lo Spirito Santo illuminerà i nostri passi, fortificherà le nostre mani, santificherà la nostra vita, rinnoverà la nostra Chiesa. Interceda per noi Maria, Madre della Chiesa, San Giovanni XXIII, testimone della generatività dello Spirito e della Chiesa, Sant' Alessandro nostro Patrono.

**+ Francesco, vescovo**

***Solennità di Sant' Alessandro  
26 agosto 2016***

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