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Talk by Pastor Luca M. Negro¹ on Social Violence and Homophobia

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Homophobia: a special problem for faiths. While it cannot be generalized, homophobic violence is often rooted in ethical considerations with religious motivations. Each faith community is therefore called to undergo a process of reflection to understand whether and to what extent it is complicit (perhaps unwittingly) in homophobic violence; and this regardless of each community's ethical assessment of homosexuality. This process, though recent, is quite advanced in various religious communities. For example, in the Catholic Church, although from a strictly doctrinal perspective it has not changed much, the pastoral approach toward homosexuals is changing significantly. Here we will discuss Christian homophobia in general, focusing specifically on the path taken by Protestant churches.

Some data on homophobia in Italy. Before delving into the Reformation churches' reflections on homosexuality, we would like to briefly touch on the scale of the homophobic phenomenon in Italy. The phenomenon appears to be growing, and although the data is highly uncertain (partly because there is no single source and the data often refers to newspaper reports in the absence of specific reports, and partly because of the lack of a specific crime of homophobic aggression in Italy), over the past year, there have been 143 cases of both verbal and physical violence: essentially, nearly one victim every two days. Since Arcigay began the research project on homophobia, which was continued by Massimo Battaglio with La Tenda di Gionata (see omofobia.org) in 2013, the number of victims has been estimated at 1,870, with an average of 155 cases per year. I find the statement made by President of the Italian Republic Sergio Mattarella, on the occasion of the last International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia on May 17, 2024, particularly significant. Noting that there are 60 countries in the world where homosexuality is punishable by imprisonment, and in some cases the death penalty, Mattarella stated that, "intolerance towards diversity and indifference to the restriction of others' freedoms constitute lacerations of democratic coexistence" and continued, "Italy is not immune to episodes of homotransphobia: people are discriminated against, crushed by prejudices, which often result in unacceptable hate speech; they are verbally and physically attacked. It is not possible to accept resignation to brutality. The violence of judgments, of which so many citizens are victims simply because of their sexual orientation, represents an offense to the entire community. The institutions' commitment must be oriented towards providing, especially to the new generations, the tools to understand the diversity of existences and different human experiences, for an inclusive society that respects identities" (statement of 17/5/2024, (www.quirinale.it)). Among the tools useful for combating homophobia should be a specific law, which, as we've said, Italy lacks. The Zan law, which was approved by the Chamber of Deputies, famously failed in the Senate thanks to the infamous "trap" in October 2021.

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The need for a law against homophobia. Unlike other religious denominations (particularly the Italian Bishops' Conference, see the note of April 26, 2021, which argued that the Zan bill called "into question the reality of the difference between men and women"), the Protestant churches gathered in the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy (FCEI) supported the need to approve the Zan bill. In a statement dated May 6, 2021, the coordinator of the FCEI's Commission for Studies, ~~on~~ Dialogue and Integration, Paolo Naso, stated: "Rights are always urgent, and for this reason, Parliament must approve the Zan bill. The text already approved by the Chamber [...] does not limit freedom of preaching or opinion but is intended to combat violence, discrimination, and hateful insults that offend, hurt, and sometimes kill. As Protestant Christians, we cannot remain silent or indifferent to the pain of those discriminated against because of their sexual orientation. At the same time, as citizens who defend the principle of the secular nature of the State, we believe that, after the long debate that took place in Parliament and in society, as other European countries have already done, Italy too must adopt a law that combats homophobia and gender-based violence." In his address, Professor Naso concluded: "For several years now, many historic Protestant churches, both Italian and foreign, in addition to welcoming homosexuals and transgender people, have been invoking blessings on same-sex unions. They do so in the belief that the Church is not a tribunal of sexuality but a community gathered around the love of God and living in love for others. What determines participation in the Church is not sexuality but the gift of faith."

The journey of Italian Protestant churches. I would like to build on Naso's last sentence to briefly outline the journey of Italian Protestant churches, which began in the 1980s with the "faith and homosexuality" camps at the Agape Ecumenical Center in the Waldensian Valleys of Piedmont. These camps were initially attended primarily by gay Catholics, even though the Agape Center belongs to the Waldensian Church. In 1992, a group called "Capernaum" was formed between Turin and the Waldensian Valleys. Its activities were then taken up nationally in 1998 by the Protestant Faith and Homosexuality Network (REFO). In 2000, thanks to REFO's impetus, the Assembly/Synod of Baptist, Methodist, and Waldensian churches established a Working Group on Homosexuality (it worked among other things, on the interpretation of biblical texts that refer—real or alleged—to the topic of homosexuality). In 2007, the same Assembly/Synod, after months of study and discussion in local communities, approved a document on homosexuality that "condemns all verbal, physical, and psychological violence, as well as all persecution against homosexuals." The year 2007, in short, was the "turning point" for the Baptist, Methodist, Waldensian churches. This historic document is worth quoting almost in its entirety:

The 4th joint session of the Baptist Evangelical Christian Union of Italy (UCEBI) General Assembly and the Synod of the Methodist and Waldensian Churches:

- 1. believes in a God of love who first welcomed us, calling us to a vocation of welcome in the spirit of the passage from Romans that says: "Therefore welcome one another, just as Christ also welcomed you for the glory of God" (15:7);*
- 2. believes that the human being is fundamentally a being in relationship with God and with his neighbors, and that the human relationship of love, experienced in full reciprocity and freedom, is sustained by God's promise;*
- 3. expresses appreciation for the fact that many local churches, regional Baptist associations, and circuits of Waldensian and Methodist churches have addressed the topic of homosexuality, based on the document produced by the Working Group on Homosexuality, in meetings, including joint ones, calmly and without preclusions and prejudices;*

4. *while confessing the sin of discrimination against homosexuals and the suffering inflicted on them by a lack of solidarity, it condemns all verbal, physical, and psychological violence, and all persecution against homosexuals;*
5. *invites all believers to support initiatives aimed at building a culture of respect, listening, and dialogue;*
6. *invites churches to welcome homosexuals without any discrimination;*
7. *invites churches, in the spirit of a secular state, to concretely support and promote projects and initiatives aimed at recognizing the civil rights of individuals and couples discriminated against on the basis of sexual orientation;*
8. *hopes that discussion and reflection, informed by a thorough and exegetically attentive reading of the Scripture, will continue in the future, starting from the recognition of ourselves as sisters and brothers in our common faith in Jesus Christ.*

Blessings and ministries. After 2007, the process continued, and in 2010, the Waldensian and Methodist Synod approved liturgical blessings for same-sex couples—before even the approval of civil unions, it should be noted! That same year, the Italian Lutheran Synod also approved same-sex blessings, while Baptists would begin accepting them a few years later (subject to the local communities' fully autonomous decision). There was also a debate on the admissibility of same-sex pastors, a debate that concluded with a de facto acceptance, meaning the issue was not deemed "relevant" (recall that there is no obligation of celibacy for Protestant pastors).

Ecumenical prayer vigils against homophobia. A unique initiative, involving not only Protestants but also many Catholic groups, is the ecumenical prayer vigils to overcome homophobia, organized annually on May 17, the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia. The vigils began in Italy in 2007, and the liturgical materials are prepared annually by REFO and the Baptist-Methodist-Waldensian Commission on Faith, Gender, and Sexuality. They are usually organized in Protestant churches but also—and increasingly—in Catholic churches and places of worship.

The rest of the evangelical world. To conclude, a quick remark on the rest of the evangelical world, the non-federal one—in short, the galaxy of Pentecostal and/or evangelical churches. Unfortunately, here the situation is radically different. With several exceptions and some timid openness, in these churches homosexuality is simply considered a sin, and is sometimes fought with what many consider violent and coercive means, such as the so-called "reparative therapies." Ethical issues related to sexuality profoundly divide conservative evangelicalism from historic Protestantism, in Italy and throughout Western countries. An echo of this divide can be found in the recent episode of Episcopalian (i.e., American Anglican) Bishop Mariann Budde, who, immediately after taking office, had the courage to challenge Trump on two crucial issues: homosexuality and migrants.

Homosexuality in the international ecumenical world. Finally, the international ecumenical world. Here too the issue is divisive, partly among different denominations (for example, Protestant churches are generally more open to the issue than Orthodox churches) and partly among different geographical areas. The "young" churches of the Third World, which are often much more sensitive to issues of justice and ecology than their European or North American counterparts, are much more cautious when it comes to addressing issues related to human sexuality. We also see this within individual denominations worldwide (issues of sexuality divide Anglicans, Methodists, etc.). There is currently a slow debate developing around a 2022 World Council of Churches (WCC) document entitled "Conversations on the Pilgrim Way. Invitation to Journey Together on Matters of Human Sexuality."