



# IN GOD WE TRUST

OPERATION SAFETY 91

## GLOBAL HUMANITIES

Year 6, Vol. 9, 2021 – ISSN 2199-3939

Editors Frank Jacob and Francesco Mangiapane

### *Religion and Politics*

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**Texts by**

Arvi Sepp and Anneleen Van Hertbruggen

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# THE DAY AFTER THE PANDEMIC

## A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF FOUR HOMILIES

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**ABSTRACT.** In Italy, after the COVID lockdown, began “phase two,” allowing worshippers to celebrate live masses. Churches reopened, but many masses were still transmitted live through social media, having a large mediatic resonance. Our research inquires the relation of Church and politics in the construction of governance: we investigate how the leaders of the religious community took a stand on political and medical ordinances in relation to public opinion. In order to do it, we will compare four homilies given on May 31, 2020 (Mass of Pentecost), and we will analyze them using semiotic and ethnolinguistic categories.

**KEYWORDS:** Coronavirus, Catholic church, Religion, Politics.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

On May 4, 2020, after the COVID lockdown, the Italian government began “phase two”: some economic activities were able to resume, and citizens were allowed to move, albeit within the restricted perimeter of their Region. This

decision started a diplomatic accident: the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI) criticized the action, since worshippers were still not allowed to celebrate live masses. Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte asked for the mediation of the Pope. The Italian government and the Bishops

<sup>1</sup> This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement no. 757314).

reached an agreement on a medical protocol by making changes to the liturgy. A maximum capacity for churches was established, and masses were often celebrated outdoors, in courtyards, or on football pitches to allow the attendance of every worshipper. Many masses are still transmitted live via social media, as they were during the lockdown.

In particular, as we will see in the first section, the adoption of the protocol governing the resumption of religious celebrations had an impact on their meaning. In particular, the awareness of being part of the Church disappears, since this effect is mainly achieved by relations between bodies: singing together, exchanging a sign of peace – cases of the *contagion of meaning* (Landowski 2004). Catechesis, group meetings, and formation were postponed.<sup>2</sup> The agreement between the Church and the State was a sensitive matter, given the bi-millennial struggle of the Catholic Church to escape the control of secular institutions.<sup>3</sup> In this context, a research question arises about the relation between the Church and politics and the construction of governance in this critical period. For this reason, in addition to the ethnographical observation of the ceremony, we studied four homilies to investigate how the leaders of the religious community took a stand on political and medical ordinances in relation to public opinion.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. THE MASS AT THE TIME OF CORONAVIRUS<sup>5</sup>

With the beginning of phase two, the government, in collaboration with the

Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI) and a technical scientific committee, drew up a protocol governing the resumption of religious celebrations. This protocol represented an important tool for the religious community to equip itself with know-how so that the celebration of masses could take place while minimizing the risk of contagion and thus protecting the health of the faithful.

Obviously, the implementation of these new rules has changed religious practice in its discursive manifestation, introducing and magnifying new values linked above all to the safety and danger of the virus. So, starting from May 18, 2020, through ethnosemiotic observations<sup>6</sup> undertaken during masses, it was possible to see how the containment measures caused a transformation of the discursive configuration of the liturgy compared to the traditional one. The changes are visible from the moment you enter the church: access is regulated by people who manage the number of believers entering according to the number established to avoid crowds.

Some volunteers, continuing this practice of inclusion/exclusion, regulate the access of the faithful to the sacred place: those who do not wear masks, those who show flu and respiratory symptoms, and those who have a body temperature above 37.5 degrees Celsius are excluded.

In some cases, these collaborators accompany the faithful into the space of the church, indicating the place where they are to sit and informing them about new ways of attending mass.

<sup>2</sup> In our corpus, this is a subject of constant complaint in homilies 1 and 2. In particular, in homily 1, the priest says: "Today we were supposed to celebrate the sacrament of the catechumenate. Some kids and their families are here, we are happy that you are here with us. We will do it as much as we can, as for everyone else."

<sup>3</sup> As we will see, homily 4 alludes to this problem.

<sup>4</sup> Though the authors discussed and designed the structure of the paper together, the section two is authored by Chiara Petrini (CUBE, University of Bologna), while sections 1, 3 and 4 were written by Francesco Galofaro (DFE, University of Turin). The conclusions were written by both authors.

<sup>5</sup> The study contained in the following paragraph is addressed in more detail in Petrini (2020).

<sup>6</sup> According to Greimas and Courtés (1982: 109), "Given that general semiotics authorizes the treatment of non-linguistic (gestural, somatic, etc.) syntagmatic concatenations as discourses or texts, the field of ethnolinguistics can be enlarged to become an ethnosemiotics; analyses, still rare, of rituals and ceremonies lead us to suppose that ethnology can become (...) the privileged locus for the construction of general models of signifying behavior." In recent years, ethnosemiotics has been developed by Francesco Marsciani (2007).

In the narrative program dictated by the protocol, these people, during the celebration of phase two, identify themselves not only in the thematic role of the faithful but also as collaborators and volunteers and perform the function of helpers, leading the faithful through already established paths and providing information of which the faithful do not have the knowledge; this preparatory activity for the mass refers, according to the construction of figurativeness, to the relationship that the tourist guide establishes with the visitor inside a museum that is indispensable for the tourist to be able to orient themselves and to obtain the information they need. In addition, the arrangement of the seats is linked to the need to maintain a safe distance of 1.5 meters between members of the faithful; in this way, the capacity of the church is significantly reduced. In some cases, there is no volunteer to indicate the place to sit, and instead pieces of tape are put in the right place.

In the church of phase two, the spatiality of the faithful undergoes a transformation: their own personal space and that of others is perceived in a new way. Moreover, the believer cannot sit next to an acquaintance and cannot communicate silently with their lips because their mouth is covered by their mask: the social dimension of the community is lost. In addition to the precautionary measures taken at the entrance for the sanitation of the sacred places, some fundamental elements that are part of the expression of the rite have been completely eliminated: hymnbooks and aids to the liturgy cannot be used, the stoups have been emptied, and the exchange of the sign of peace among the faithful must be omitted, as the passing of the basket at the time of the offertory.

The elimination of booklets and liturgical aids has brought about a new change: the use of the smartphone, through

which the faithful can follow the liturgy or chants, considerably upsets traditional religious practice. In fact, the smartphone has always been considered as not belonging to the religious semiosphere.<sup>7</sup>

In phase two, the smartphone is included in a re-semanticization process that, in phase one, made it a necessary technological support to follow masses online; in this case, it performs the function of a liturgical aid, without which it would not be possible to actively participate in the mass. The presence of the smartphone in a religious context could be inappropriate and alien, and in fact the smartphone is often associated with the idea of necessity, but above all it also conveys fun, entertainment, levity and boredom: these values are in contrast with the solemnity and seriousness of the liturgy.

A large part of the traditional religious rite is characterized by the closeness and physical contact both between the bodies of the faithful and between the faithful and the objects present in the church. A significant example is the presence at the entrance of a church of an empty stoup containing a pack of hand sanitizing gel. During the liturgy, the possibility of touching should be reduced as much as possible, because it is through contact that the coronavirus spreads. The practice of making the sign of the cross with blessed water recalls the sacramental reality of Catholic baptism and, therefore, this gesture means remembering being part of the Church and the community of God.

As Costantino Marmo (2011, par. 1.1) states, “sacramental signs are associated with other sensitive signs in their social function of aggregation of a community, which is both union and distinction from other communities,” and thus “it is what allows a group of individuals to recognize themselves as members of the same community, thanks to the convention adopted by them; that is, it fulfils an identity function, and it is necessary that this

<sup>7</sup> According to Juri Lotman (2005: 208), “all semiotic space may be regarded as a unified mechanism (if not organism). In this case, primacy does not lie in one or another sign, but in the ‘greater system,’ namely the semiosphere. The semiosphere is that same semiotic space, outside of which semiosis itself cannot exist.”

aggregative function is realized through a sensitive sign.”<sup>8</sup>

Thus, it is possible to affirm that the identity and social function and the community dimension that reside in the awareness of being part of the Church disappear. Thus, once they have entered the church, the faithful will not find blessed water but sanitizing gel and have to apply it on their hands to prevent the spread of bacteria. This new gesture replaces, at the level of the expression of the liturgy, the practice through which baptism is remembered. The attestation of being a Christian in this way is not expressed concretely in the discursiveness of the practice but is eliminated as a possible helper of the narrative program of spreading the virus to make room for an opponent who, by sanitizing his hands, hinders the contagion. The placement of sanitizing gel inside the holy water stoup without water and the same temporal placement in the liturgy allow the creation of an association of the two gestures that convey the idea of purification: of the soul through baptism and of the body through sanitation.

The offertory is another example of the change in the expression of religious practice. The gesture of passing the offertory basket represents, for Christians, a way to add a material contribution to the spiritual one. The presentation of gifts and the passing of the basket carry the seed of sharing represented mainly by the *hic et nunc* of both religious actions. To eliminate the possibility of contagion, the passing of the basket has been eliminated. The spacing rule has also resulted in the suspension of the choir’s activity. In the church, the act of singing conveys the idea of joy and communion among the faithful; each chorister must concentrate on their own voice and on its relationship with the other voices present, and listening is essential so that each voice can coordinate with the others reciprocally.

The choristers live an aesthetic experience that comes from the competence of a reciprocal feeling, created by their physical proximity that allows the listening and tuning of voices. In phase two, the faithful cannot identify with the thematic role of the chorister because the closeness required would not allow them to keep at a safe distance. The faithful can sing during the liturgy but without *adjusting*<sup>9</sup> to the other singers. Also, in this case, the lack of contact and closeness among the faithful tends to overshadow and narcotize the value of community sharing.

Another element that changes the plan of expression of the practice is the exchange of the sign of peace. According to liturgical tradition, through the gesture of shaking hands, Christians remember and share the peace of the risen Christ. The handshake, which would create an increased risk of contagion, has been replaced by the faithful with a nod of the head or a gesture with the hand; believers thus manifest the need to fill that lack with a different movement on the level of expression but which, in the same way, refers to the need for communication and sharing among the faithful.

In addition to the elements outlined above, the Eucharist, the most important part of the Catholic rite, has undergone a major change of meaning due to the security measures. In fact, when the priest prepares to give the consecrated host to the community, some elements that refer to the sanitary semiosphere are visible on the scene. The celebrants are obliged to carry out hygienic-sanitary measures: sanitizing gel placed on the altar is applied to the hands, disposable gloves are put on, and a mask is placed over the nose and mouth. The physical presence of objects such as the container of sanitizing gel, latex gloves and masks, the positions taken up behind the altar by the priest in the center and the concelebrants helping him on the side, the set of gestures that make up the practice of sani-

<sup>8</sup> In this passage, Marmo refers to the reflections of William of Auvergne in his treatise *De sacramentis*.

<sup>9</sup> We will return to the definition of *adjustment* in the third section.

tation, and the use of the altar on which items rest in order that the procedure can be carried out, contribute to a particular creation of figurativeness that refers to a semiosphere of medical health in which doctors are preparing to perform surgery.

Another substantial difference is the way communion is distributed: the faithful must remain in their place and signal through the position of their body (standing or sitting) whether or not they want to receive communion. If, in the traditional procession to the altar, a *reciprocal coming together* is seen that highlights the durability of the process and magnifies the sense of community, in this way there emerges the singularity of the faithful as opposed to the collective actor of the community that moves in procession.

In conclusion, using ethnosemiotic methodology, it has been possible to see how the changes in the liturgical rite have also caused a change in the significance of religious practice. In fact, as Landowski (2005: 42–43) argues: “This also explains why not even one detail of a ritual, a custom, a habit should be changed: if they draw their value and necessity only from being what they are because that is how it has always been, then by construction one cannot change a single element, however tiny, without destroying them completely.”

Thus the key to its interpretation lies in the double meaning of the word “contagion”: denying the possibility of closeness and contact between the faithful has prevented not only the contagion of the virus, understood as an infectious disease that passes from one body to another, but also that passionate contagion that allows the faithful to exchange the sign of peace with their neighbor to communicate the peace of the risen Christ, that contagion that arises from the closeness of bodies in procession to receive the Body of Christ or allows the faithful to renew with holy water the baptism that has

made them part of the community and the Church.

### 3. THE HOMILIES

The most important legal document on the content of the homilies is represented by the *Homiletic Directory* published by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, which implements both Pope Benedict XVI’s and Pope Francis’ instructions on this subject (CONG 2015) and includes a definition of the homily: “In the broadest sense, the homily is a discourse about the mysteries of faith and the standards of Christian life in a way suited to the particular needs of the listeners” (par. 11).

While exposing some aspects of the readings, the homily should be tailored to the needs of the particular community and indeed draw inspiration from it (see par. 8). This feature is present in all the homilies of the corpus, as they make reference to the pandemic and to its effects on community life. Biblical exegesis, doctrinal instruction, and personal witness should be functional to this goal and not substitute it (see par. 7). These elements are also represented, in varying degrees, in our corpus.

Coming to the homily during mass on Pentecost, it should express its link with the Eucharist, correlating Acts 2 to John 20:22: ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’ (CONG 2015: par. 56). However, even if Easter and Pentecost connect all the homilies of the corpus, the main focus is always on one of the two readings: Acts 2 (homilies 1–3, whose interpretation is more ecclesiological) or John 14:23–31 (homily 4, whose reading is rather Christological). The *Homiletic Directory* also indicates the relevant paragraphs of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 1993) that should be consulted by the priest. The connection of the four-part structure of the Catechism should provide a key reading to the celebrant. However, once again, each homily utilizes a narrow se-

lection of the passages suggested by the *Homiletic Directory*.<sup>10</sup> Some passages are unselected: for example, the relation between the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary (CCC 1993: 726) is not represented in our corpus.

From a methodological point of view, when collecting the homilies, we considered three axes (Table 1):

HOMILY	ATTITUDE TOWARD THE FUTURE	LOCATION	ATTITUDE TOWARD INNOVATION
1	worry	center	not hostile ("we should forget criticism")
2	hope	center	friendly
3	hope	periphery	friendly
4	worry	center	hostile (open criticism)

**TAB. 1.** THE THREE AXES OF THE CORPUS.

- Euphoric/dysphoric attitudes toward the future. This point is very important since, according to CONG (2015: par. 54), Pentecost should be the climax of 50 days of joyful celebration following the Paschal Triduum. This positive outlook on the future is present only in the 2<sup>nd</sup> homily and, to a lesser degree, in the 3<sup>rd</sup>.
- Location with regard to the pandemic. Piedmont ranks second in Italy for the number of victims per Region. The center/periphery opposition is considered relevant because Italy was shaken daily by conflicts between the central government and the governors of the Regions, whose interests often diverged since only the northern ones were heavily affected by the pandemic in the considered period.
- Positive attitudes toward Pope Francis' innovative reforms often led to conservative reactions.

These preliminary judgments on each homily (e.g., worry, not hostile) are not based on the analysis. We picked up these homilies as a *signifying set*, "grasped intuitively and upon which the analytic pro-

cedures will be applied" (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 171). Our purpose is only the constitution of the smallest corpus featuring the utmost possible variety of meanings. The analysis will allow us to substitute these judgments with structural categories, more relevant to distinguish the different 'political styles' of the homilies.

The considered homilies are similar in length (10 minutes) and present a plain, simple rhetorical structure. As we will see, some elements are always present, though not necessarily in the same order:

1. A general discussion of the abstract theme of the homily.
2. A reference to the readings of the day that represent a case of figurative rationality.
3. A reference to the present situation.

These elements, combined and projected on the syntagmatic axe, link the readings to worshippers' world of experience, while the abstract theme provides a clue to justify the relation. This structure is sometimes recursive when different themes are present and ordered hierarchically, as in the case of homily 2.

### 3.1 FIRST HOMILY: UNITY AND NOT DIVISION

The first homily was recorded in a parish of the Lingotto neighborhood in Turin. The theme of the homily is "unity." The Holy Spirit is seen as an operator capable of bringing unity to the community. The unity of the Christian commu-

<sup>10</sup> We will point out these references in the analysis of each homily.

nity is opposed to “social distancing” (*distanziamento sociale*), the unfortunate watchword adopted by the Italian government in the first phase of the pandemic to make citizens pay attention to keeping precautions when meeting other people. The priest carefully clarifies that the object of his criticism is not the safety measure but the meaning of the expression. The opposition between unity and division is reconducted to a privative modal opposition between wanting and not wanting to see the Other: it would be nicer if we said ‘physical distance’ when staying at a distance. ‘Social distancing’ sounds very bad: I don’t want to see you, to have anything to do with you. Physical distancing means only prudence; we stay distant. Social distancing is the exact opposite of the Holy Spirit.

The figurative trajectory of the readings allows a transformation: thanks to the Holy Spirit, the different nations present on the day of Pentecost are able to understand each other. The tale is opposed to the interesting trajectory in the biblical account of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9). The different figurative relations between Acts and the Old Testament, in the form of tongues “as of fire,” are mentioned in agreement with the CCC (1993: par. 696).

Finally, unity is linked to the pandemic and to “phase two.” The priest recalls that, though lockdown is over, the emergency is still serious. The risk is division (between citizens and different Italian Regions and inside the Catholic Church) and violence – the priest makes reference to the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in the US. Unity is needed to rebuild Italy. And this unity is precisely the gift of the Holy Spirit during Pentecost. In semiotic terms, the Holy Spirit is a *sender*: often posited as belonging to the transcendent universe, the sender is the one who communicates to the subject-receiver (belonging to the immanent universe) not only the elements of modal competence but also the set of values at stake (Greimas and Courtés 1979: 294).

In our case, the Spirit transfers to the community the value of unity. In conclu-

sion, the priest invites worshippers to pray to overcome divisions and to illuminate the hearts and minds of the decision-makers.

### 3.2 SECOND HOMILY: DIVERSITY AND NOT UNITY

The second homily was recorded in Cavoretto, a village in the suburbs of Turin, and broadcast by the priest on Facebook (Parrocchia San Pietro in Vincoli Cavoretto 2020). The homily starts with the difficulty in understanding the Holy Spirit, which is indeed important, being the third member of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is represented in the readings as an abstract operator capable of transforming *fear* into *courage*: “Here this Holy Spirit arrives in this Cenacle, where he finds a community, where he finds believers, where he finds the Church closed, frightened, on the defensive. And the coming Holy Spirit breaks the bank.”

Thanks to the Holy Spirit, the community of the Apostles finds the courage to quit the Cenacle and preach to the nations. The same courage led the Church to the Second Vatican Council. During Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descends upon different nations, consecrating diversity. This difference is richness: “The Holy Spirit wants us to be brilliant, he doesn’t want us to be trivial.” As we can see, the opposition between fear and courage introduces and regulates a second opposition, between *diversity* and *unity*, where unity is interpreted as ‘uniformity,’ ‘boredom.’ On the contrary, diversity is a resource to rebuild a different, improved society: “[the Spirit] suggests to us a new, different perspective: perhaps we can bring back to the center what we experienced in the days, in the months in which we were locked up in our homes. We can’t pretend nothing has happened.”

As the Spirit represents the empowerment of the subject, it plays the narrative role of the helper.

### 3.3. THIRD HOMILY: BOTH UNITY AND DIVERSITY

The third homily was pronounced by the Pope during the Pentecost mass (Vat-

ican News 2020). The Pope's innovative style of communication attracted the attention of the semiotic community from the beginning (Lorusso and Peverini 2017; see also Viganò 2018). During the lockdown phase, Pope Francis played an important role in orienting the Catholic world, given the impossibility of attending mass. A collection of homilies and prayers was published for free on the official Vatican website and regularly updated (Bergoglio 2020).

Coming to the homily, the abstract theme is once again the relationship between unity and diversity. They are both values instituted by the Creator: the solution to their conflict is the construction of a complex term (unity + diversity) operated by the Holy Spirit, identified with harmony. The Pope refers clearly to the CCC (1993: par. 738), as suggested by the *Homiletic Directory* (CONG 2015: Appendix I).

Where the world sees conflicts (e.g., between progressives and conservatives), the Holy Spirit sees a collective actor capable of embodying the difference (e.g., Children of the Father). As in the second homily, the figurative trajectory operates a transformation allowing the Apostles to leave and preach to the people, but the Pope underlines the value of the *gift* represented by preaching. The Holy Spirit invites us to give ourselves. The Holy Spirit is a healer that allows us to overcome paralysis: "Holy Spirit, memory of God, revive in us the memory of the gift received; free us from the paralysis of selfishness and kindle in us the desire to serve, to do good, since worse than this crisis there is only the drama of wasting it, by turning inwards."

We can see how the moral opposition of selfishness/generosity regulates the opposition between unity and diversity. The pandemic is not euphorically seen as

an opportunity, as in the second homily, but the future could be even worse if worshippers do not seize the Spirit's gifts.

#### 3.4. FOURTH HOMILY: PARTICIPATION AS UNITY

The fourth homily was pronounced in the traditionalist parish of Vocogno and uploaded to YouTube (radicatinellafede 2020a). This homily is particular because it appears as a lesson of theology.<sup>11</sup> An important difference between this homily and the others is its focus, which is on the Gospel (Jn. 14:23–31), not on the narration of the Pentecost (Acts 2:1–11). John's passage is less figurative than the Acts of the Apostles: Jesus teaches the Apostles directly. In this passage of the Gospel, Jesus declares that the Holy Spirit's function is to remind the disciples of his teachings when he leaves them. This point is consistent with the CCC (1993: par. 2623; see also CONG 2015: Appendix I). He invites them to fulfill the Father's will. According to the priest, this fulfillment is the spirit of Pentecost; the interpretation according to which Jesus disappears and something else, i.e., the Holy Spirit, substitutes him is to be considered heresy. The abstract value in this case is still unity, seen as the *participation* of the Christian community in the Holy Trinity through the second person (Jesus), who adopted us. This participation implies fulfilling the Father's will, as Jesus did. This is the only way to be saved.<sup>12</sup> Participation in the Trinity is assimilated to *participation* in the sacraments, which is consistent with the CCC (1993: par. 1076), a crucial passage referenced by the CONG (2015: Appendix I), which is pointed out only by this homily. This key passage allows a link with the pandemic. The Church is implicitly accused of having diffused the heretical, protestant

<sup>11</sup> Given the poor quality of the broadcast, the priest recorded a different, less passionate version of the homily, which deepens the theological notions of the live recording. In our analysis, we refer to the homily pronounced during the mass, but we also checked the second version (radicatinellafede 2020b), which slightly differs regarding values.

<sup>12</sup> Jesus came into the world to do the will of the heavenly Father and demonstrated his love toward the Father, not toward us. At the same time, the Father takes pleasures in His son, not in us. The participative relation with the Person of the Son is the only way to enter in a soteriological relation with the Trinity.

opinion according to which a spiritual unity with Jesus is sufficient to be saved: “All it took was to say for two months that it is sufficient to be spiritually united with Jesus, that people have already forgotten the importance of the sacraments.”

The priest criticizes worshippers who are ready to obey the State and are afraid to return to take part in the mass again: “You would have cursed the Church. The State asked you and you did it. Today the Church asks you: come to the sacraments with abundance, with courage, because it is the Lord’s Pentecost.” Ironically, the moral opposition between *courage* and *fear* appears as central here, in the traditionalist homily,<sup>13</sup> as in the second, the progressive one. In the present case, however, the conflict of *courage/fear* is homologated to the opposition between *participation in* and *absence from* the sacraments and unity with Christ.

#### 4. FINDINGS

Eric Landowski (2005) proposed a typology consisting of four regimes of social interaction: programming, manipulation,<sup>14</sup> adjustment, and accident. Each regime of interaction features its own regime of meaning and risk (see Figure 1). Landowski also suggests a trajectory linking the different regimes, defining their syntagmatic relation. We propose to interpret our homilies in this light as an attempt at *adjustment* involving three different actors: government, clergy, and worshippers. In this perspective:

1. *Accident* is represented by the beginning of phase two and the conflict between Italian bishops and the government. The regime of meaning is *absurdity*. The risk of such non-regulated interactions is *pure*.
2. *Manipulation*: after Pope Francis’ mediation between the govern-

ment and the bishops, an agreement was reached on the changes to be made in the liturgy; the bishops and the government embody the role of the *sender*, while priests and worshippers can be considered the manipulated subjects. The risk of such interactions is *limited*.

3. *Programming*: the success of the manipulation led to the modified liturgy, which regulates the interactions between clergy and worshippers during masses. While the risk of programmed interactions is *limited*, their meaning is *insignificant*. As we saw in the first section, this is true *a fortiori*, since the new liturgy prevents individuals from forming a collective actor, the *ecclesia*.
4. *Adjustment*: each of the four homilies proposes a way to react to the *insignificant* situation to recover a spiritual meaning located in the near future. Though the regime of risk is *insecure*, the regime of meaning is *making sense*.

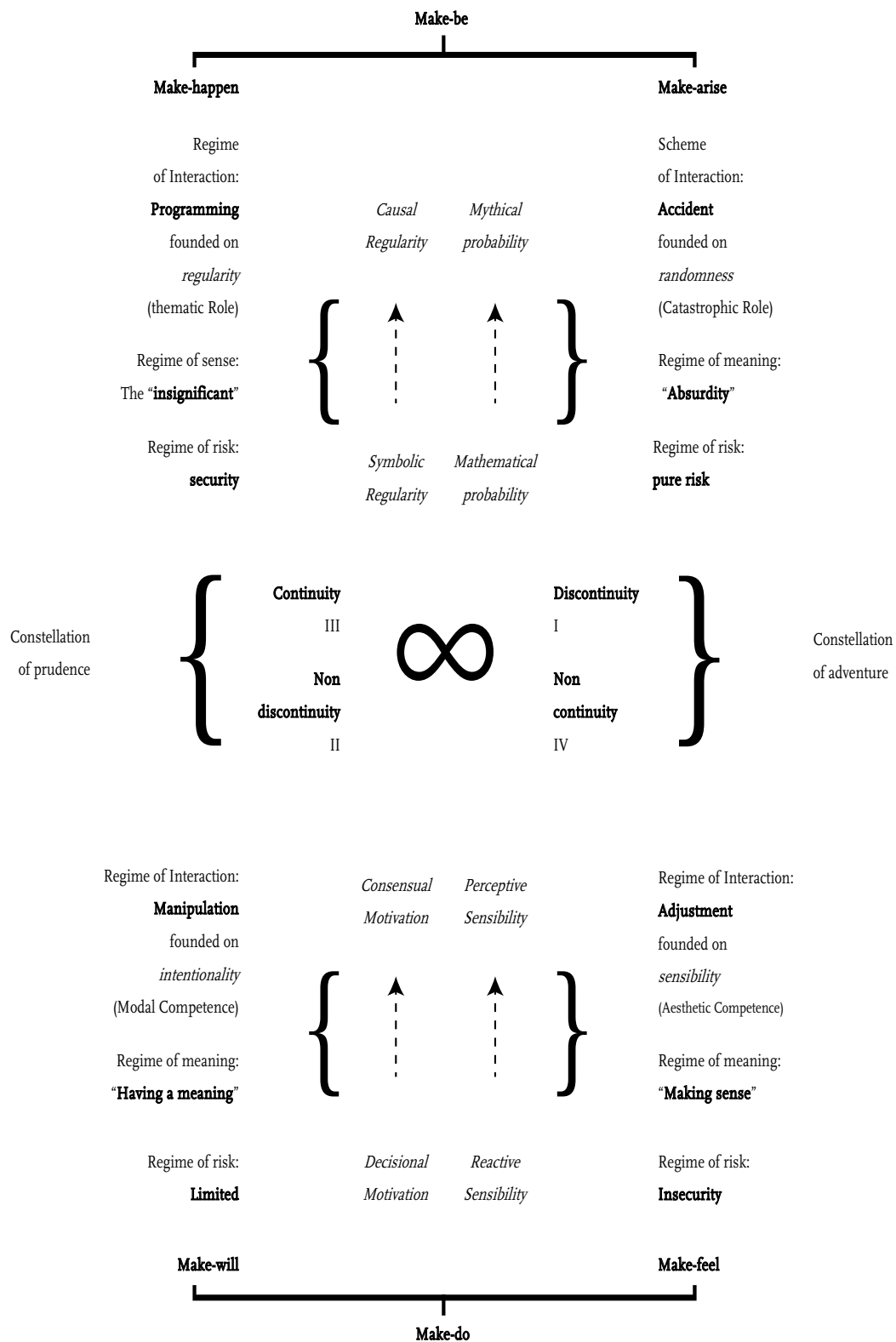
The four different tactics of adjustment can be considered as the *metric of a political space*.

#### 4.1 SEMANTICS OF THE POLITICAL SPACE

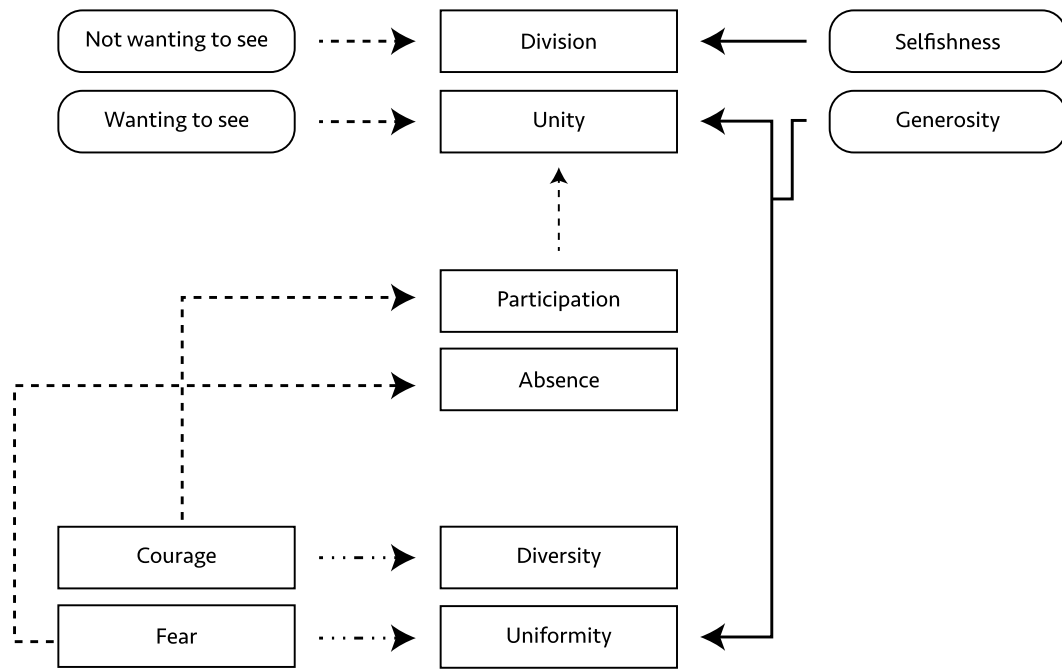
According to Umberto Eco (1976: 293), semantic space has a nonlinear, contradictory format. The attribution of a certain property to a semantic complex is always a choice. For example, in homily 2, ‘diversity’ is opposed to ‘unity’ as ‘positive’ is axiologically opposed to ‘negative,’ while in homily 3, ‘unity’ and ‘diversity’ are positively reconciled – Greimas and Courtés (1982: 47) would consider it a *complex term* in reference to the coexistence of contraries featured by the logical relation ‘both... and...’.

<sup>13</sup> The second version of the homily presents a different homologation: courage/fear = participation/absence. Courage/fear is the same variable opposition we found in homily 2.

<sup>14</sup> “Manipulation” is a technical term in semiotics without negative connotations. According to Greimas and Courtés (1982: 184), “manipulation is characterized as an action of humans upon other humans with the goal of having them carry out a given program.”



**FIG. 2.** ERIC LANDOWSKI'S SQUARE OF THE REGIMES OF INTERACTION AND MEANING (DEMURU 2020: 88).



**FIG. 3.** A PARTIAL RECONSTRUCTION OF THE SEMANTIC UNIVERSE IMPLIED BY THE FOUR HOMILIES. IN PARTICULAR, THE FIGURE DISPLAYS HOW DIFFERENT MORAL OPPOSITIONS REGULATE DIFFERENT VARIANTS OF THE ABSTRACT OPPOSITION 'ONE/MANIFOLD.'

As the analysis pointed out, each homily homologates a 'moral' opposition to an *invariant*, abstract opposition, e.g., *fear/courage* = *diversity/uniformity* (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 144). The different abstract oppositions we meet in the homilies (such as participation/absence or uniformity/diversity) seem to be simple variants of the same deep opposition *one/manifold*. The different 'moral' oppositions are variables: "A term is labelled invariant if its presence is the necessary condition for the presence of another term in relation with which it stands, and which itself is said to be variable. This involves a reformulation of the concept of presupposition: the invariant is the presupposed term in the relation of presupposition" (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 162).

The variables 'regulate' the meaning of the homily, adding a peculiar nuance to the abstract invariant and endowing it with an axiological orientation (positive-negative). The presence of willingness in the first homily and of the generosity/selfishness opposition let us suspect that a modal component is always present

in this *regulatory function*. At the same time, as is normal in a Catholic perspective, willingness is not sufficient without Grace – and this is the value transferred by the Holy Spirit, considered as a sender. The contradictory nature of the semantic space also emerges from the comparison of homilies 2, 3, and 4: both the Pope and the traditionalist priest found their argument on the moral opposition between generosity and selfishness. As we saw, the Pope uses it to reconcile the opposition between unity and diversity; the traditionalist priest underlines the value of unity against the defection from the sacraments; and finally, based on a different moral opposition, the 'modernist' priest underlines diversity, considered as creativity against a boring conformity (homily 2). From our point of view, the important structural feature that the analysis let emerge consists of this syntagmatic link between a moral opposition and an abstract one, capable of being projected on the worshipper's world of experience to provide it with a new meaning, previously jeopardized by the pandemic.

#### 4.2 POLITICAL ORIENTATION

Once the meaning of the world is restored, worshippers can act again, directly or indirectly. In the first homily, the role of worshippers is to pray for the decision-makers, whereas in the second homily, they are invited to innovate society. In the first homily, the pandemic is considered a threat and the goal of the prayer is to reunite the community and to rebuild Italy, while in the second homily, the pandemic is considered an opportunity that let us rediscover the pleasure of being part of the community and collective engagement. The attitude toward politics emerging from the third homily should not be confused with the second. In fact, the Pope asks worshippers never to lose hope and to give themselves: this is the necessary condition for both indirect and direct engagement. Fi-

nally, in the fourth homily, worshippers are warned about subsuming their faith to the requests of the decision-makers through convenient justifications.

The relations between worshippers and decision-makers emerging from the homilies mainly depend on the actantial function attributed to worshippers and decision-makers in the narrative structure.<sup>15</sup> If we distinguish between the subject of the action (to do) and the sender (to let the subject do), we obtain the typology reported in Table 2.

As a consequence of this, the real difference between the fourth homily and the others regards the opposition between /to let the subject do/ and /to not let the subject do/. This implies different judgments on the pandemic and forces us to articulate our first impression of our vision of the future (Table 3).

RELATION	WORSHIPPERS	DECISION-MAKERS	RELATION BETWEEN THEMATIC ROLES	HOMILY
Destination	sender	subject	worshippers let decision-makers do	1, 3
Identification	both sender and subject	both sender and subject	worshippers are decision-makers	2, 3
Opposition	sender	anti-subject	worshippers do not let decision-makers do	4

**TAB. 2.** THE RELATION BETWEEN WORSHIPPERS AND DECISION-MAKERS FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE RESPECTIVE THEMATIC ROLES ASSIGNED TO THEM BY THE HOMILIES. FROM THIS POINT OF VIEW, *IDENTIFICATION* IS ONLY A PARTICULAR CASE OF *DESTINATION*, IN WHICH WORSHIPPERS TAKE THE ROLE OF BOTH SENDER AND SUBJECT – A SELF-ADDRESSING INSTANCE.

HOMILY	ATTITUDE TOWARD THE PANDEMIC	ATTITUDE TOWARD THE FUTURE
1	non-euphoric: future is full of hazards	conservative (restoration)
2	euphoric: the pandemic is an opportunity to improve	progressive (renovation)
3	non-dysphoric: the future could be even worse	unitarian (both restoration and renovation)
4	dysphoric: worshippers have lost their salvation	counteractive (opposition)

**TAB. 3.** ATTITUDES TOWARD THE FUTURE (TAB. 1) RECONSIDERED IN LIGHT OF THE ANALYSIS

<sup>15</sup> According to Greimas and Courtés (1982), “An actant can be thought of as that which accomplishes or undergoes an act, independently of all other determinations ... The term “actant” is linked with a particular conception of the syntax which interrelates the functions of the elementary utterance ...” In this perspective, the actants of narrative syntax (or of the utterance) are subject/object, sender/receiver. According to Bruno Latour (1998), political and religious discourse share a similar enunciation regime, which produces “quasi-subjects” (e.g., people, assemblies, groupings, processions) and their mutual relations, making their absence become present.

#### 4.3 POLICY DIRECTIONS

According to the present analysis, the celebrant plays a fundamental role in relation to a *veridiction contract* (Grimas and Courtés 1982: 60), a fiduciary convention between the sender and the receiver involving the veridictory status (the truth) of the message. The veridictory contract is preceded by a persuasive doing (causing to believe) of the enunciator, to which the receiver responds by way of an interpretive doing (a believing). Specifically, worshippers already believe in the scriptures. The structure that links their everyday life to the figurative rationality of the Gospel with the mediation of abstract themes ensures the transmission of truth. Without this structure, the transmission of truth would not be assured: worshippers would perceive the political indications of the priest as mere off-contract opinions.

As we saw, religious leaders' arguments cover a wide range of political sensitivities, mirroring the major sub-genres of political discourse. Considered as a whole, they orient public opinion, avoiding the deterioration of the debate and keeping the community united.

An evaluation of the different political styles emerging from the analysis of our corpus is outside the scope of the present work. When contrasting the pandemic, decision-makers should avoid directing their political communication at blaming one or more groups because of their attitude toward the future. For example, from a conservative point of view, it could be a mistake to attack progressives' expectations of a world of greater solidarity after the pandemic, since this element can be useful to let the public opinion cope with the worst consequences of the lockdown. In a similar way, from a progressive point of view, it would be an error to identify the counteractive political style with reaction and the far-right, since the aim of this peculiar discursive sub-genre is to guarantee the autonomy of the community: this can be useful to partially preserve the identity of citizens

during the lockdown or the subsequent economic crisis. Each kind of religious leader (conservative, progressive, unitarian, counteractive) can be considered by decision-makers as an interesting mediator, playing a fundamental role to guarantee and safeguard unity, diversity, as well as integration. The important point is to integrate into the political discourse the peculiar syntagmatic structure that links values and togetherness and is capable of providing a collective identity to individuals and reactivating them.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the critical situation experienced by the Catholic world during the so-called "phase two," following the restart of religious activities in Italian churches after the lockdown. This section summarizes the main arguments. The Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI), in agreement with the government, drew up a protocol containing rules for managing the presence of people in churches during religious celebrations. Much of the traditional religious ritual, however, involves proximity and contact between the bodies of the worshippers or between their bodies and the objects used during the ritual. Ethnosemiotics has been used to analytically describe both the changes in the manifested religious practice and their effects on its meaning. By preventing the contagion of the virus, the passionate contagion that allows the faithful to feel part of the community and the Church is also omitted.

This problem was enunciated in the four homilies delivered during the Mass of Pentecost, analyzed in the second part of the paper. The analysis let emerge the position of religious leaders in relation to the political ordinances. In general, the homily, in addition to referring to the liturgical readings and the norms of Christian life, recalls the needs and situations that the community is experiencing at that time; in fact, in all the homilies analyzed, references are made to the pandemic and its effects on the lives of the worshippers.

Three structural elements, present in all homilies, connect the readings to the faithful's world of experience: a general discussion of the abstract theme of the homily, references to the readings of the day, and references to the current situation. Furthermore, each of the four homilies presents a different way to reshape the semantic universe starting from the intraceptive antonymy between unity and diversity, linking it to a moral opposition: in this way, social and political values are projected into the concrete experience of the worshipper to give it a new meaning, previously endangered by the pandemic. Thence, each homily assigns a different role to worshippers, clergy, and decision-makers, regulating their social interactions and constructing different political attitudes toward the future and pandemics.

Our analysis brings to light the important role of the religious leader as a point of contact between the community and policy-makers. Their influence on public (political) opinion leads us to assert that it might be a mistake to construct discourses by antagonizing one or more of these religious and political positions. Regardless of the political views involved, this could further destabilize communities from a social standpoint as well.

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## APPENDIX I

Links to the internet addresses of homilies 2–4 are provided in the list of works cited. Homily 1 has been collected by participant observation. Here we report the original text:

[00:00:01] C'è un'espressione che oramai siamo abituati ad usare perché di questi tempi è diventata una legge, una legge di comportamento: distanziamento sociale. Che non è una bella espressione. Sarebbe più bello se si fosse detto "distanziamento fisico": stare a distanza.

[00:00:30] "Distanziamento sociale" suona molto male: non ti voglio vedere, avere a

che fare con te. Distanziamento fisico vuol dire solo “prudenza, stiamo distanti.”

[00:00:47] “Distanziamento sociale” è esattamente l’opposto dello spirito santo. Va tutto benissimo, bisogna mettere le mascherine, facciamo vedere l’igienizzazione delle mani... Tutto quello che dobbiamo fare lo facciamo, perché ci mancherebbe altro. Nessuno vuole fare del male a nessuno. Ma il “distanziamento sociale” è proprio il contrario dello spirito santo.

[00:01:10] Perché se c’è un dono che lo spirito santo porta con sé, nel cuore di ogni cristiano, è l’unità. È tutto ciò che è contrario a ciò che divide. Allora, se il “distanziamento sociale” divide, lo spirito santo unisce. E non è soltanto una questione materiale, spirituale.

[00:01:48] Idealmente siamo tutti uniti. Abbiamo in comune il fatto che con lo spirito santo, che Gesù ha promesso, che è stato mandato, che si è riversato sulla Chiesa, con quella bella immagine delle lingue di fuoco, nel cenacolo, il vento che soffia... lo abbiamo ricevuto tutti.

[00:02:15] e siamo qui perché siamo battezzati. Il battesimo ci è donato, ci ha reso parte di quello spirito di Dio che Gesù è venuto a portare.

[00:02:36] C’è nella prima storia che abbiamo sentito, questo bellissimo racconto di questi apostoli, tutti inorgogliti e pieni di voglia di fare

[00:02:48] e di dire che parlano il loro dialetto – sono della Galilea, “si sente l’accento, neh” – e tutti quanti li capiscono. C’è poi pervenuto un elenco di popoli e di nazioni: questo lungo elenco non è a caso,

[00:03:12] È l’elenco di tutte le nazioni che erano conosciute e con cui Israele aveva dei rapporti, commerciali o meno. Non sono tutte le nazioni del mondo: la Cina non è citata; esisteva già, anzi.

[00:03:28] Però, tutti quelli che erano conosciuti nel bacino del mediterraneo, tutti quelli con cui Israele aveva dei rapporti... Per cui quell’idea che è già presente in tante pagine dell’antico testamento dell’universalità di Dio, cioè il fatto che riguarda tutti, si riprende, si rinnova, e tutti capiscono. E’ il contrario di Babele. Babele è il modello in cui gli uomini vogliono raggiungere Dio e prendere il suo posto, e costruiscono una torre.

[00:04:08] Ma nel momento in cui lo Spirito agisce, tutti capiscono la stessa cosa. Tutti intendono lo stesso linguaggio.

[00:04:18] Il Vangelo parla di questa apparizione di Gesù, del soffio di Gesù sugli apostoli, che era il primo dono dello spirito santo, che arriva con le lingue di fuoco, certo, e che

si conclude con questa frase, per certi versi facilmente interpretabile, per altri molto meno, “a coloro cui perdonerete i peccati saranno perdonati, a coloro cui non perdonerete non saranno perdonati.” E spesso la si interpreta come un “potere” dato ai preti di confessare, che ne so... L’interpretazione più corretta secondo me è di nuovo che è lo Spirito che è stato sugli apostoli che dà la possibilità di ricostruire se stessi. Che il perdono è la “riformazione” del proprio cuore.

[00:05:06] Di quello che si spezza che viene rimesso insieme. Allora c’è l’unità dei popoli e c’è l’unità del cuore. C’è l’unità della vita. Questo è il dono dello spirito. A cosa serve lo spirito santo? A questo.

[00:05:28] Perché diciamo che Dio è Padre, Figlio e Spirito Santo? Per questo. Perché di questa unità abbiamo bisogno. Viviamo un tempo della nostra storia che nessuno di noi avrebbe immaginato di vivere – ma neanche... magari guardando qualche film... “L’epidemia” non fa parte del nostro immaginario.

[00:05:51] Viviamo in un tempo in cui siamo chiamati al “distanziamento fisico,” e viviamo un tempo in cui abbiamo sempre di più e ancora più bisogno di quell’unità che ci dona lo Spirito Santo. Le questioni sanitarie continuano ad esserci, siamo tutti più tranquilli, ci vediamo... oggi dovevamo celebrare il sacramento del catecumenato. Alcuni ragazzi e le loro famiglie sono qui, siamo contenti che siate qui con noi. Lo faremo, quanto potremo, come per tutti gli altri.

[00:06:34] Eppure, oggi abbiamo bisogno ancora di più di questo. Dicevo che le questioni sanitarie si risolveranno,

[00:06:51] ma è un tempo in cui abbiamo bisogno di rifare l’Italia.

[00:07:03] Perché tutti quanti abbiamo vissuto questo periodo... mi permetto di dire con rabbia. Colpa di quello, colpa di quell’altro, è un complotto, destra, sinistra, su e giù... Un clima che pre-esisteva, la pandemia l’ha semplicemente tirato fuori ancora di più. Andiamo incontro ad un tempo – adesso; non fra un po’ – in cui le divisioni sociali saranno ancora più forti.

[00:08:06] Non mi compete... non sono un pessimista di natura. Ma certamente le prospettive non sono... rosee. Quello che sta succedendo in America non è colpa della pandemia. È molto più antico, il problema. Però questo l’ha scatenato. In Italia queste cose quando succederanno? Non voglio fare il profeta del malaugurio, scusate l’espressione che non è da predica, “portare sfiga.”

[00:08:32] ma se c’è un momento della storia, della nostra storia personale e della storia

dell'umanità, e anche del nostro Paese in cui abbiamo bisogno di migliorare il dono dell'unità, cioè di restaurare coesione – l'immagine che abbiamo tutti in mente è quella di Francesco che passeggia da solo in Piazza San Pietro, sotto la pioggia, con le sirene che passano, e... dice una parola:

[00:08:55] “Siamo tutti sulla stessa barca.” Se c'è un'immagine che noi dobbiamo portarci dietro è proprio questa. E se c'è qualcosa di cui, ogni tanto, Francesco, si trovava [sembra una critica, ma la registrazione è cattiva]... non conta più: siamo tutti sulla stessa barca.

[00:09:09] E solo se ricordiamo questo e solo se lavoriamo su questo, andiamo avanti. Il

dono dello Spirito santo è prima di tutto questo: il fatto di sentirsi uniti dentro più che fuori. Insieme agli altri, essere sulla stessa barca, e condividere tutto. Che il Signore, che lo Spirito santo illumini i nostri cuori, le nostre menti, illumini i cuori e le menti di chi deve prendere decisioni anche difficili, perché il cammino sia un cammino di pace. Ripeto: non voglio essere né portatore di sfortuna né buonista; non mi compete e non ne sono capace. Ma di questo noi abbiamo bisogno: che il dono dello spirito riempi le nostre vite, i nostri cuori, la vita dei nostri figli.