

RUMOURS

Synod dogma makes revolutionary Conclave reform credible

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**Luisella
Scrosati**



Conclave reform: yes or no? Since Diane Montagna published the [news](#) in the US fortnightly *The Remnant* on Saturday, 4 November, that the Pope, in close contact with Jesuit Cardinal Gianfranco Ghirlanda, is effectively thinking about a revolutionary reform

of the conclave, there has been a rush of denials and counter-denials.

On the same day, *The Pillar* also reported the same news. But, on Sunday, 5 November, came the *denial* of the Vatican Press Office, and the next day it was the turn of Cardinal Ghirlanda himself, who, contacted by email by *LifeSiteNews*, replied: "before your email, I had no news about the reform of the Conclave that you mention". And he called the news circulating on the web "absolutely false". He adopted the same tones with the American broadcaster EWTN (see *here*): "I do not know anything about it and any implication I have in it is a pure lie".

Yesterday, the blog *Messainlatino*, however, pressed the issue: "Our sources do not agree with Ghirlanda, who should be more cautious about making hasty statements in order to avoid the risk of being contradicted in the event that someone has a copy of the documents in the study...". And *Marco Tosatti* also received confirmation from one of his contacts 'in high places': "The news of an initiative by Jorge Mario Bergoglio in that direction is true. Although, probably now, the leaked information has made its future path more difficult".

But, what are the alleged critical points of this reform? First of all, cardinals over 80 would be excluded from the General Congregations. It is clear that these congregations are particularly important, because it is in them that possible candidates begin to be identified, their qualities and faults are discussed, and their suitability in a given historical moment is assessed. In fact, No. 7 of the Apostolic Constitution *Universi Dominici Gregis*, which regulates the way in which the Pope is elected, provides that "the General Congregations must be attended by all cardinals who are not legitimately impeded, as soon as they are informed of the vacancy of the Apostolic See"; whereas cardinals who have already reached the age of 80 at the moment when the Apostolic See becomes vacant, according to No. 33, cannot take part in the voting for the new Pope. It is also stipulated that these cardinals may, if they deem it appropriate, also abstain from participating in the General Congregations.

A further change is alleged in the synodal style: in essence, the plenary session of the General Congregations would be replaced by smaller groups, led by a moderator, along the lines of the recent Synod. In essence, the body of cardinals would be dismembered and a frank confrontation, involving all the cardinals, would be made difficult, and the moderators of the individual groups would end up with a singular power.

Finally, the most peculiar revolution concerns those entitled to vote. The

indiscretion appears particularly precise here: 75% of the voters would remain the prerogative of the cardinal electors, while the remaining 25% would consist of lay and religious men and women, chosen by the outgoing Pope, before the See becomes vacant.

The news, in the writer's opinion, appears highly probable. First of all, because it is not exactly a bolt out of the blue. In the book-interview *El pastor: Desafíos, razones y reflexiones de Francisco sobre su pontificado*, released in March this year and published in Italian translation on 24 October last, with the title *Non sei solo. Sfide, risposte, speranze* [You are not alone. Challenges, answers, hopes], the Pope had already spoken about changing the election of his successor: "In fact, I could issue a decree that changes the requirements for entering the conclave and allows a bishop who is not a cardinal to participate. From the dogmatic point of view, there would be no problem". The Pope has therefore already thought about it, limiting himself to the admission of non-cardinal bishops. But, according to Diane Montagna's source, it is Ghirlanda himself who insists on further extending the right to vote also to non-bishops.

Note that 'I could'. Given the delicacy of the issue, one would have expected a mode of expression suggesting that a decision on the subject should involve all the cardinals, be carefully pondered, calling in historians, canonists, and theologians. Instead, the Pope cut it short with a "I could issue a decree": I am the Pope and I decide.

From this absolutist conception of papal power follows the second feature that makes the much-discussed news credible: Francis only makes important decisions with his duly selected loyalists. Ghirlanda's loyalty to the leader has been tested at length, with an endless series of commissariats ordered from above. His appointment as cardinal was both a credit to his loyalty and an investiture for a new and more important mission. A bit like Tucho Fernández. Note also the perfect timing: the Church's four-year synodal path is the ideal screen behind which hides a mode of exercising power that is not synodal. Nor has it ever been.

If we only consider the *motu proprio* (thus excluding decrees) of his ten years of pontificate so far, Francis has issued 51. An enormity, if we think that in the twenty-seven years of John Paul II's pontificate there were only 29, and in the eight years of Benedict XVI, 13. Francis likes to govern by consulting and promoting his personal 'experts', without turning to those institutions that exist in the Church precisely to advise the Pontiff and support him in his work, without creating rifts and contradictions. So, also from this point of view, the news appears to be very credible.

The third and final “credibility test”: Francis has already shown that he does not have too many scruples about turning the tables. His recent sudden decision to have non-bishops vote in a Synod of bishops is proof of this. It was a decision taken when the race had already started, which changed what he himself had laid down in the Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio* (2018). All while claiming to affirm the logical forcing that such an assembly of bishops and non-bishops should continue to be called the Synod of Bishops. We are perfectly in line with that “I could” mentioned above.

Confirmation from anonymous sources, three credible clues, no proof (yet). We shall see.