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"The Brotherhoods are a focal point in the life of the Church, where the binomial clerics/laity is overcome"

Clara Raimundo - Brasil | 13 Sep 2023



The Royal and Venerable Brotherhood of the Blessed Sacrament of Mafra "is the oldest public institution of faithful Catholics in the municipality of Mafra, having been founded in the mid-sixteenth century", says its Prior, Francisco Simões do Paço (in the image, on the left). Photo: © RVISSM.

***Many may think that brotherhoods are a thing of the past, but the holding of the Pan-European Forum of Brotherhoods, whose fourth edition will take place in Portugal, more specifically at the Palace-Convent of Mafra, on the 16th and 17th, shows that these institutions are alive and that their role continues to be very significant today. The Royal and Venerable Brotherhood of the Blessed Sacrament of Mafra is an example of this, and is about to experience "a historic moment": the pontifical coronation of the image of Our Lady of Solitude, dated 1774, in its custody.***

The numbers are impressive to anyone: according to the Census of European Brotherhoods started in 2020 (when the first edition of the Forum was held), and which is still ongoing: there are at least 27 thousand of these active entities on our continent, which have about six million members.

"There would certainly have been more brotherhoods in 1900, but after a decline in the second half of the twentieth century, the birth of new brotherhoods and the rebirth of old ones, now compensates for the closures that existed," explain **Umberto Angeloni** and **Francesco Antonetti**, members of the Forum's coordinating committee, in statements to 7MARGENS.

The two leaders were involved in the organization of the three previous editions of the Pan-European Forum (in 2020 in Lugano, Switzerland, in Malaga, Spain, in 2021, and last year in Nice, France) and have no doubts: the role of brotherhoods – which have existed in Europe since the eighth century – continues to be decisive, both "from a social point of view, for their works of mercy are as necessary as ever", both "from a religious point of view, since they are the principal instrument for transmitting the faith between generations, mainly through forms of popular piety", they affirm, adding: "They represent the 'living roots' of our European tradition and civilisation".

In this edition of the Forum, "the main theme will be the definition of an agenda of public events in Rome during the Jubilee of 2025", and the Pope "has dedicated three full days exclusively to the brotherhoods (from 16 to 18 May 2025)" and Bishop Rino Fisichella [pro-prefect of the Dicastery for Evangelization] "hopes that brothers and sisters from all over the world will be present and give living witness", Umberto Angeloni and Francesco Antonetti said.

### **The Brotherhood of Mafra, which holds a very special image**

Francisco Simões do Paço, judge of the Royal and Venerable Brotherhood of the Blessed Sacrament of Mafra, has already been to Nice and hopes to be present in Rome in two years' time. For now, he is preparing to welcome, in what he considers to be his home, the delegates of the federations of several countries that will be present at this IV Pan-European Forum: France, Italy, Poland, Malta, England, Spain and Switzerland, without forgetting the participants from the most diverse regions of Portugal.



Francisco Simões do Paço (pictured, standing) during his speech at the III Pan-European Forum of Brotherhoods, which took place in Nice, in 2022. Photo: © RVISSM.

At 68 years old, Francisco Simões do Paço is the oldest member of this Brotherhood. He was enrolled by his uncle, who was also a judge at the time, 55 years ago, and it is with undisguised pride that he tells 7MARGEM that this "is the oldest public institution of the Catholic faithful in the municipality of Mafra, having been founded in the mid-sixteenth century".

It is possible that it is also the most numerous: with 400 registered members (the youngest is 16 years old and the oldest is 97), "she is the historical heir of the great brotherhoods founded in Mafra during the reign of D. João V", the monarch who ordered the construction of the palace-convent that is now recognized as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

This justifies "the large estate that we custody, and which continues to exercise its catechetical functions in the processions and other acts of worship promoted in the Royal Basilica of Mafra", highlights the judge of the Brotherhood.



The image of Our Lady of Solitude, guarded by the Royal and Venerable Brotherhood of the Blessed Sacrament of Mafra, dates from 1774. Photo: © RVISSM.

This is the case of the image of Our Lady of Solitude, venerated in the Basilica and dating from 1774, which will receive the pontifical coronation at the end of the Forum. This will be the third image in Portugal to receive the honour of being crowned in the name and with the authority of the Pope, after the image of Our Lady of Sameiro (Braga), in 1904, and the sculpture of Our Lady of Fatima that is in the Chapel of the Apparitions, in 1946.

The concession is seen as "a recognition of the devotion to the Blessed Virgin present in the venerable image of the Solitude of the Basilica of Mafra, seeking to extend the importance of this Marian title and its cult to the entire Catholic world".

But why is this image so special? "His commission is shrouded in mystery, as there are payments for the materials for its execution, but there is not the slightest trace of the sculptor", explains Francisco Simões do Paço. "It was the object of devotion of the Royal Family, and until a few years ago, it was only exposed on the days of the processions, until the moment when a series of prayers was discovered inside one of the cloaks of Our Lady's trousseau, made by unidentified women, which aroused interest and devotion to Our Lady of Solitude", Notes. Currently, it is exposed to worship all year round, in the Basilica of Mafra, which has become "one of the most visited Marian shrines in Portugal". Simões do Paço recalls, therefore, the "jubilation" and the "enormous gratitude" with which he received the news that Pope Francis would grant "the most extraordinary pontifical grace ever achieved in Mafra" and hopes that this will awaken "the increase of devotion to Our Lady, Queen of Portugal".

The image will now "gain" a crown, by the artist Santiago Rodrigues Lopes, who was inspired by the models of crowns attributed to João Frederico Ludovice, architect of the Palace-Convent of Mafra. Including in the cartouches representations of the symbolic invocations of Our Lady that appear represented on the outside of the dome of the Basilica of Mafra, the crown is finished with a lapis lazuli orb, a gift from an Armenian Orthodox Christian from Aleppo, and by a cross that reproduces the model of the Portuguese royal crown. The crown, manufactured by the Spanish goldsmith Manuel Valera Pérez, "will be one of the most remarkable pieces of sacred jewellery produced for Portugal in recent years", and has already been blessed by Pope Francis, in the chapel of the Apostolic Nunciature in Lisbon, on August 4, during World Youth Day. All the gold and silver used in its manufacture were purposely offered for this purpose by worshippers and visitors to the Basilica of Mafra.



The crown manufactured for the image of Our Lady is finished with a lapis lazuli orb, a gift from an Armenian Orthodox Christian from Aleppo, and a cross that reproduces the model of the Portuguese royal crown.  
Photo: © Manuel Valera Pérez.

### **"A historic moment" and the Pope's request**

The preparations for the ceremonies, which will be presided over by Cardinal Tolentino Mendonça – designated by the Pope as his special envoy – "have been very intense", shares the head of the Brotherhood. But, above all, they have been "an excellent opportunity to strengthen the ties and cooperation between the various civil institutions, and the relationship with the Church, and particularly with the Brotherhood," he said. "The various parish groups have collaborated in the organization of all the ceremonies, requiring the presence of elements from other parishes, thus promoting good relations between Christians."

This is, moreover, another sign of how "the brotherhoods are a central point in the life of the Church", says Francisco Simões do Paço. "Yesterday as today, they are a fundamental point of the action of the laity, where the binomial clerics/laity is surpassed, because among the members of the Brotherhood we have laity and clerics, all with similar obligations, and without any distinction", he adds.

"The essential mission of the brotherhoods is to promote the evangelization of the people, in an effective and synodal way, with equality between men and women, a circumstance that is clearly verified in the historical documents that we have in the archive", he also points out.

And, convinced that this will be "a historic moment" for Mafra and Portugal, he invites all the faithful to participate in the ceremonies scheduled for next Saturday and Sunday. "I highlight the solemn vespers [Saturday, at 6:45 pm], which will be played by six organs, choir, carillon and Army Fanfare" and "the moment of the coronation itself [Sunday, at 11 am], a fact that has not been seen in Portugal since 1946, and is a unique occasion to revisit the Basilica of Mafra, being able to admire the cultural assets that for conservation reasons cannot always be exposed", Notes.

One of the proofs of the importance of the moment is "the fact that our dear Pope Francis has addressed a message especially dedicated to the participants of the Forum" and to all the people who participate in the mass for the papal coronation on September 17, adds Francisco Simões do Paço.

[The message](#), whose version in Portuguese 7MARGEM had first-hand access, refers to "such a great occasion". which is the crowning of the "beautiful image of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Solitude" and exhorts all those who take part in the ceremonies "by the mysterious gift of divine piety to adhere more closely to Christ and to associate themselves with his passion, and to be at the faithful service of the mystery of redemption, following the admirable witness of maternal charity of the Most Holy Virgin Mary of Solitude".

"May this community of the faithful, in celebrating this moment of joy with lively affection, manifest in its conduct what it keeps in memory," Pope Francis concludes.