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Luca Casarini, a special synod guest from the aid organization Mediterranea Saving Humans,

Luca Casarini, a special synod guest from the aid organization Mediterranea Saving Humans, speaks during a briefing about the assembly of the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican Oct. 11. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

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Luca Casarini, a longtime and well-known Italian activist, is a special guest at the assembly of the Synod of Bishops; he's encouraged to speak, but has no vote. And he said he is learning a lot.

Joining the synod briefing for journalists Oct. 11, Casarini was asked about his past — his arrest for involvement in the violent protests during the G8 Summit in Genoa, Italy, in 2001 and the Italian government's current investigation of him for promoting illegal immigration by rescuing migrants at sea.

"I can respond by saying that in the Gospels, Jesus welcomes publicans and prostitutes. He goes in search of sinners," Casarini said. He was found not guilty of the 2001 charges, he added, and does not believe it is a crime to rescue people at

risk of drowning.

Migration figured prominently in the preparation for the synod, and it was a key issue in the assembly’s speeches and group discussions Oct. 10-11, officials said. Other topics included the tension between welcoming LGBTQ people and affirming church teaching, promoting Christian unity, valuing the Eastern Catholic churches, responding to the clerical sexual abuse crisis, ensuring women are not treated like "second-class" citizens in the church and a host of other issues connected to promoting communion in the church and unity in the world.

Paolo Ruffini, prefect of the Dicastery for Communication, told reporters he felt no "polarization" in the synod discussions, although clearly members had different opinions on many of the topics covered.

Casarini is a controversial figure in Italy, and his participation in the synod was surprising to some. One journalist asked him how he handled being in the synod with people from countries that claim they are Christian, but oppose opening more routes for legal immigration. He also was asked if he was comfortable with all the praying and protocol and moments of silence at the synod.

"Well, first of all, I really consider all those who are present at the synod my brothers and sisters," he responded. "I am learning to transform my anger, my resentment, into pity or something else because it is something I want to do for myself. The time of resentment and hatred is over."

"The secret that I am slowly trying to learn is how to put myself in another's shoes," Casarini said.

The attempt, he said, is having "crazy" results, "like the fact that I'm at the synod. It's crazy."

As for being in such a formal, religious environment, Casarini said he is especially enjoying the moments of silence, "but I always feel out of place and inadequate in every situation."

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Ruffini told reporters that a small group of poor people joined Pope Francis for lunch Oct. 10 at his residence, forming a new synod "small group." When asked what they wanted from the synod, he said, they replied, "Love, only love."

On the question of how the church can be more welcoming to those who feel excluded, including LGBTQ Catholics and the divorced and civilly remarried, Ruffini said synod members had obvious differences when it came to their points of emphasis.

He said one point made repeatedly, though, was that "love and truth always go together." It follows that pastoral outreach to people who feel excluded cannot ignore church teaching on marriage and sexuality, but Christianity never teaches "truth without love," he said.

At least one synod member, he said, asked for further discernment by the church on the topic of sexual identity while "others said that was not necessary."

"Everyone, almost, who intervened said every form of homophobia must be refuted," Ruffini added.

Canadian Cardinal Gérald Lacroix of Québec told reporters that the synod was not called to change the church's doctrine, but to find better ways "to walk together, to listen together, to discern together" so the church can respond to the "big questions" that Catholics are facing in their real lives.

The synod cannot function, he said, if each member simply presents what he or she thinks about a certain topic and is not willing to listen to the others.

"But if I am able to express what I think, and listen to the other, and another, and another, and after listening, maybe I will change a little what I think, or maybe the others will change what they think," then some movement happens, Lacroix said.

"It's about having this humility not to think I alone have the truth and the right point of view," he said. "We seek together. In the light of the Spirit and the Word of God," slowly "we find convergences, we end up finding a path that helps us move forward," he said.

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series.