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## Synod23 – 1st General Congregation: Address of the Holy Father Francis at the Opening Session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops

The following is the address delivered by Pope Francis this afternoon in the Paul VI Hall, during the Opening Session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops:

### Address of the Holy Father

Brothers and sisters, good afternoon!

I greet all of you as we begin this synodal journey.

I like to recall that it was Saint Paul VI who said that the Church in the West had lost the idea of synodality, and that was why he created the Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops, which has held numerous meetings, many Synods on different topics.

Still, the expression of synodality is not yet mature. I remember when I was a secretary in one of these Synods, and while I was preparing for the voting the Cardinal Secretary – a very good Belgian missionary – would come and look. “What are you doing?” – “Getting ready for what will be voted on tomorrow” – “What is that? No, we won’t be voting on that.” – “But it’s synodal” – “No, no. No voting on that.” We were not used to letting everyone express themselves freely. So slowly, almost sixty years later, the path has gone in this direction, and today we are able to arrive at this Synod on synodality.

It is not easy, but it is beautiful, it is very beautiful. A Synod that all the bishops of the world wanted. In the survey of preferences taken among all the bishops of the world following the Synod for the Amazon, the theme of synodality came in second place. In first place were priests and in third place, I believe, there was a social issue. But synodality came in second. Because all the bishops of the world felt a need to reflect on synodality. Why? Because they all understood that the time was ripe for something like this.

It is in that spirit that we begin working today. I like to say that the Synod is not a parliament; it is something else. The Synod is not a gathering among friends to resolve some current problems or to give opinions; it is something else. Let us not forget, brothers and sisters, that we are not the protagonist of the Synod: it is the Holy Spirit. If the Spirit is in our midst to guide us, it will be a good Synod. If there are other ways of going about things, based on human, personal or ideological interests, it will not be a Synod, but more of a parliamentary meeting, which is another thing. A Synod is a journey that the Holy Spirit makes. You have been given a few patristic texts that can assist us in the opening of the Synod. They are taken from Saint Basil, who wrote that fine treatise on the Holy Spirit. Why? Because it is necessary to understand this reality, which is not something easy.

When, on fiftieth anniversary of the creation of the Synod, the theologians prepared a letter for me, which I signed, it was a good step forward. Now, however, we have found the explanation of that process. We are not the protagonists of the Synod; it is the Holy Spirit, and if we leave room for the Holy Spirit, the Synod will go well. These pages of Saint Basil have been distributed to you in different languages: English, French, Portuguese and Spanish, and you now have them in your hands. I will not say anything about these texts, but I ask you to reflect and meditate on them.

The Holy Spirit is the protagonist of the Church's life: the plan of our salvation is worked out by the grace of the Spirit. He is one who takes the lead. If we have not understood this, we will be like those people mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles [who said]: "Did you receive the Holy Spirit?" – "What is the Holy Spirit? We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit" (cf. 19:2). We need to realize that he is the protagonist of the Church's life, the One who carries it forward.

The Holy Spirit sets off a profound and varied process within the Church community: the "commotion" of Pentecost. Something odd happened at Pentecost: everything had been organized, everything was clear... That morning there was an uproar, everyone speaking in every language, and everyone understanding... A variety in which it was not clear what everything meant... And after this came the great work of the Holy Spirit: not unity, no, but harmony. The Spirit unites us in harmony, the harmony of all differences. If there is no harmony, the Spirit is not there. That is how he works.

The third text can prove helpful: the Holy Spirit is the harmonious composer of salvation history. Harmony – we need to be careful – does not mean "synthesis," but "a bond of communion between dissimilar parts." If, in this Synod, we end up with an identical statement, everybody the same, without nuances, the Spirit is not there, he is left out. He creates that harmony which is not synthesis, but a bond of communion between dissimilar parts.

The Church: a single harmony made up of many voices and the work of the Holy Spirit. That is how we should think of the Church. Each Christian community, each individual is distinctive, but this distinctiveness must be included in the symphony of the Church, and that symphony is made "just right" by the Spirit: that is not something we can do. We are not a parliament; we are not the United Nations; no, we are something else.

The Holy Spirit is the source of harmony among the Churches. It is interesting what Basil tells his brother bishops: "Therefore, just as we consider for our own good, our mutual harmony and unity, so we urge you to share in the sufferings due to the divisions, and not to separate from each other due to our distance, but to embrace one another in harmony, in one body, because we are united in communion according to the Spirit."

The Holy Spirit takes us by the hand and comforts us. The presence of the Spirit is – may I say – almost maternal. Like a mother, he leads us and gives us this comfort. He is the Comforter; that is one of the names of the Spirit: the Comforter. The comforting action of the Holy Spirit is represented by the innkeeper entrusted with the man who had fallen among robbers (cf. *Lk* 10:34-35). Basil comments on that parable of the Good Samaritan; in the innkeeper, he sees the Holy Spirit who allows one person's good will and another person's sins to proceed on a harmonious way.

The One who watches over the Church is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit exercises his work of "comforting" in a multiplicity of ways. We have to learn how to hear the voices of the Spirit: all of them are different. To learn how

to discern.

Then too, it is the Spirit who makes the Church. He makes the Church. There is a very important connection between the Word and the Spirit. We can think about this: the Word and the Spirit. Scripture, the liturgy and the ancient tradition speak to us of the “sadness” of the Holy Spirit, and among the things that most sadden the Holy Spirit are empty words. Empty words, worldly words, and – to descend a bit to a certain human habit, but not a good one – gossiping. Gossiping is the “anti-Holy Spirit”; it goes against him. It is a very common disease among us. And empty words sadden the Holy Spirit. “Do not sadden the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed” (cf. *Eph* 4:30). What great evil it is to sadden God’s Holy Spirit. Do we even need to say this? Gossip, backbiting: this saddens the Holy Spirit. It is the most common disease in the Church: gossiping. And if we don’t let him heal us of this disease, it will be hard for this synodal journey to be a good one. At least in here, if you don’t agree with what that bishop, or that sister, or that layperson says, tell them to their face. That’s what a synod is for. To tell the truth, not for talking behind people’s backs.

The Holy Spirit confirms us in faith. He is the one who does it continually....

Read these texts of Basil – they are in your languages – because I think they will help us to make room for the Spirit in our hearts. I repeat: this is not a parliament, this is not a meeting about the Church’s pastoral activity. This is a *syn-odos*: journeying together is the programme. We have done so much, as [Cardinal Grech] said: consultation, all this, with the people of God. But the one who takes this in hand, who guides us is the Holy Spirit. If he is not here, this will not lead to a good outcome.

I insist on this: please, do not sadden the Spirit. And in our theology, make room for the Holy Spirit. And in this Synod, discern the voices of the Spirit from those that are not of the Spirit, but worldly. In my opinion, the foulest disease that we see in the Church today – it has always been there, not just today – is what goes against the Spirit: the spirit of worldliness. It is a spirit, but not one that is holy: the spirit of worldliness. Pay heed to this: let us not yield the place of the Holy Spirit to worldly things – even good things, like common sense; that is helpful, but the Spirit goes beyond that. We must learn to live in our Church with the Holy Spirit. I urge you. Reflect on these texts of Saint Basil, which will help us greatly.

Then, I want to say that in this Synod – also to make room for the Holy Spirit – the priority should be to listen. This is the priority. We have to give a message to the press, to the journalists, who do very fine, very good work. We have to provide a communication that reflects this life in the Holy Spirit. This requires an asceticism – pardon me for speaking this way to the journalists – a certain fasting from public speech in order to ensure this. Let whatever is published be in this vein. Some will say – and are saying – that the bishops are afraid and that is why they don’t want the journalists talking. No. The work of journalists is very important. But we have to help them so that they can also speak of this journeying in the Spirit. More than speaking, the priority is that of listening. I ask journalists to please make this known to people, that they realize that the priority is to listen. During the Synod on the Family, public opinion, the fruit of our worldliness, [thought] that communion was going to be given to the divorced, and in that spirit we began the Synod. When we had the Synod for the Amazon, public opinion, pressure, [thought] that *virī probati* were going to be [ordained], and we went in under that pressure. Now there is speculation about this Synod: “What are they going to do?”, “Maybe ordain women”... I don’t know, those are things they are saying out there. And it is often said that the bishops are afraid to talk about what is going on. For this reason, I ask you, members of the press, to do your work well, fairly, so that the Church and people of good will – other people will say what they will – can understand that also in the Church, listening has priority. Communicate this: it is so important.

Thank you for helping all of us, as the Church takes this “break”. The Church is taking a break, as the Apostles did after Good Friday, on Holy Saturday, behind closed doors, but not, like them, out of fear. Still, the Church is “taking a break”. It is a break for the whole Church, as we engage in listening. This is the most important message. Thank you for your work. Thank you for what you do. Again, I encourage you, if you can, to read these passages from Saint Basil, which are very helpful. Thank you.

