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OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE



BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIEGE
PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLIS

BOLLETTINO

SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

N. 180319a

Monday 19.03.2018

Opening of the Plenary Assembly of the Pre-Synodal Meeting in preparation for the 15th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (19-24 March)

Words of the Pope before the prayer

Address of the Holy Father

Greeting of Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri

This morning, at the *Maria Mater Ecclesia* international Pontifical College, the Plenary Assembly of the Pre-Synodal Meeting in preparation for the 15th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops was inaugurated in the presence of the Holy Father. It will continue its work until Saturday 24 March.

After the opening greetings from His Eminence Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, general secretary of the Synod of Bishops, the Pope gave his address. Five young people then gave their testimonies.

Subsequently, at 11.20, the Pope began a dialogue with the young people.

The following are the words of the Holy Father before the prayer and the address given during the Assembly, and the greeting from Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri.

Words of the Pope before the prayer

Now, each person in his own faith, his own doubt, in what he has in the soul, think of God, think of the need for God, think of the doubt he has (if God exists...), think of his own conscience and ask for the blessing and goodness upon all of us. Amen.

Address of the Holy Father

Dear young people, good morning!

I greet all 15,340 of you! Let us hope that tomorrow will be more in our conversation, to bring out what each of you and we have in our hearts. Speak courageously. Without shame. Here shame is left outside the door. We must speak with courage: what I feel I say and if someone feels offended, I ask forgiveness and I go ahead. You know how to speak like this. But we must listen with humility. If this person talks and I do not like it, I have to listen to him more, because everyone has the right to be heard, just as everyone has the right to speak.

Thank you for accepting the invitation to come here. Some of you have had to take a long trip. Others, instead of going to sleep – because for them it is time to go to sleep – are connected with you. They will spend the night listening. You come from many parts of the world and bring with you a great variety of peoples, cultures and even religions: you are not all Catholics and Christians, not even all believers, but you are certainly all inspired by the desire to give the best of yourselves. And I have no doubt about this. I also greet those who will link up, and who have already done so: thank you for your contribution!

I wish to thank in a special way the Secretariat of the Synod, the Cardinal Secretary, the Archbishop Secretary and all, all those who work in the Secretariat of the Synod. They have worked hard for this and have had the ability to invent, and great creativity. Thank you so much, Cardinal Baldisseri, and to all your collaborators.

You are invited because your contribution is essential. We need you to prepare for the Synod which will bring together the bishops in October on the theme “Young people, faith and vocational discernment”. In many moments in the history of the Church, as well as in numerous biblical episodes, God wished to speak through the youngest: I think, for example, of Samuel, David and Daniel. I really like the story of Samuel when he hears the voice of God. The Bible says: “At that time there was not the habit of hearing God’s voice. It was a disoriented people”. It was a young man who opened that door. In difficult moments, the Lord moves history forward with the young. They tell the truth, they are not ashamed. I do not say that they are “shameless”, but they are not ashamed and they tell the truth. And David as a young man begins with that courage. Even with his sins. Because it is interesting, all these were not born saints, they were not born righteous, models for the others. They are all sinful men and women, but who felt the desire to do something good, God drove them and they went ahead. And this is beautiful. We can think: “These things are for the right people, for priests and nuns”. No, it is for everyone. And especially you young people, because you have so much strength to say things, to feel things, to laugh, even to cry. We adults very often, very often, forget the ability to cry, we have become accustomed: “The world is like this ... we get by”. And we move on. Therefore I urge you, please: be courageous in these days, say everything that comes to you; and if you are wrong, another will correct you. But forward, with courage!

1. Too often we talk about young people without being challenged by them. When someone wants to make a campaign or something, they say, ah, praise to the young! – it is true, isn’t it? – but does not allow young people to challenge them. Praising is a way of pleasing people. But people are not silly or stupid. People understand. Only fools do not understand. In Spanish there is a beautiful motto: “Praise the fool and you will see him work”. Give a the pat on the shoulder and he will be happy, because he is a fool, he does not notice. But you are not fools! Even the best analyses of the world of youth, while useful – they are useful – do not supplant the need for a face-to-face encounter. They talk about today’s youth. Look, out of curiosity, how many articles, how many conferences, talk about today’s youth. I would like to tell you one thing: youth does not exist! There are young people, stories, faces, looks, illusions. There are young people. Talking about youth is easy. They make abstractions, percentages ... No. Your face, your heart, what does it say? Conversing with, listening to the young. Sometimes, obviously, young people are not Nobel laureates for prudence. No. Sometimes they talk out of hand. Life is like that, but you have to listen to them.

Some might think it would be easier to keep you at a safe distance, so as not to be provoked by you. But it is not enough to exchange the odd message, or share nice photographs. Young people must be taken seriously! It seems we are surrounded by a culture that, if on the one hand it idolizes youth, trying to prevent it from passing

by, on the other it excludes many young people from being active agents. It is a cosmetic philosophy. People grow and try to make themselves up, to seem younger, but they do not let the young grow. This is very common. Why? Because they do not let themselves be challenged. It is important. Often you are marginalized from ordinary public life and you find yourself begging for jobs that do not guarantee you a future. I do not know if this happens in all your countries, but in many... If I am not mistaken, the rate of youth unemployment here in Italy, for those under the age of 25, is around 35%. In other country in Europe, bordering Italy, it is 47%. In another European country near Italy, more than 50%. What can a young person do if he or she cannot find work? He becomes ill – depression – he sinks into depression, he commits suicide – it makes us think: the statistics on youth suicide are all manipulated, all of them; he rebels – but it is a way of committing suicide – or he takes an aeroplane and goes to a city I do not want to name and enrolls in Isis or in one of those guerrilla movements. At least they have a meaning in life and will have a monthly wage. And this is a social sin! Society is responsible for this. But I would like you to say what the causes and the reasons are, and not to say, “I don’t really know why either”. How do you live this drama? It would help us greatly. Too often you are left alone. But the truth is also the fact that you are builders of culture, with your style and your originality. It is a relative distance, as you are capable of building a culture that perhaps we do not see, but which goes ahead. This is a space that we want so as to hear about your culture, about what you are building.

In the Church – I am convinced – it should not be this way: to close the door, without listening. The Gospel asks us: its message of closeness invites us to meet and exchange, to accept and love each other seriously, to walk together and to share without fear. And this pre-Synodal Meeting should be a sign of something great: the Church’s wish to listen to all the young, without exclusion. And this is not to make politics. It is not out of an artificial “youth-philia”, no, but because we have a need to understand better what God and history are asking of us. If you are missing, then a part of the access to God is missing.

2. The upcoming Synod proposes in particular to develop the conditions for the young to be *accompanied* with passion and competence *in vocational discernment*, that is, “to recognize and accept the call to the fullness of life and love” (*Preparatory Document*, Introduction). We all have this calling. You, in the initial phase, are young. This is the basic certainty: God loves each one of us, and addresses a call to each one personally. It is a gift that, when it is discovered, fills us with joy (cf. *Mt* 13: 44-46). Be sure: God trusts in you, He loves you and He calls to you. And there will never be any shortcoming on His part, because He is faithful and truly believes in you. God is faithful. For the believers, I say, “God is faithful”. I address to you the question that one day He asked the first disciples: “What are you seeking?” (*Jn* 1: 38). I too, in this moment, ask you a question, to each one of you: “What are you seeking? You, what are you seeking in your life?” Say it, it will do us good to listen to it. Say it. We are in need of this: to hear of your journey in life. What do you seek? I invite you to share the search of life we Him, to walk together. And we, we wish to do likewise, because we cannot but share with enthusiasm the search for the true joy of each person, and we cannot keep only for ourselves He Who has changed our life: Jesus. Your peers and your friends, even without knowing it, also await a call of salvation.

3. The next Synod will also be a call to the Church, to rediscover a *renewed youthful dynamism*. I have been able to read some of the emails of the questionnaire placed online by the Secretariat of the Synod and I was struck by the appeal launched by various young people, who ask adults to be close to them and help them in important decisions. A girl observed that the young lack points of reference and no-one drives them to activate the resources they have. Then, alongside the positive aspects of the world of youth, she underlined the dangers, including alcohol, drugs, and sexuality lived in a consumerist manner. They are dependencies, no? And she concluded almost with a cry: “Help the world of the young, that is increasingly falling apart”. I do not know if the world of the young is increasingly falling apart, I do not know. But I hear that the cry of this girl is sincere, and demands attention. It is up to you to respond to this girl, to converse with this girl. She is one of you and we need to see where this wake-up call leads us. In the Church too we must learn new forms of presence and closeness. It is very important. I am reminded of when Moses wanted to say to the People of God what the core of God’s love is. And he says: “What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to Him?” Love is nearness. And they, the youth of today, ask the Church to be near to them. You Christians, you who believe in the closeness of Christ, you Catholics, be close, not distance. And you know well that there are many, many ways of being distant, many. You educate everyone, with white gloves, but keep a distance so as not to get your hands dirty. The youth of today demand that we are close to them: Catholics, Christians, believers, and non-believers. Everyone. And to this end, a young person recounted with

enthusiasm his attendance at various meetings with these words. He says: "The most important thing is the presence of the religious among us young people as friends who listen to us, know us and advise us". Consecrated men and women who are close to us. They listen, they know and, to those who seek counsel, they advise. I know some of you who do this.

The splendid *Message to the Young* of Vatican Council II comes to mind. And today too a stimulus to combat every selfishness and to build with courage a better world. It is an invitation to seek new paths and to journey along them boldly and trustfully, keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus and opening up to the Holy Spirit, to rejuvenate the very countenance of the Church. Because it is in Jesus and in the Spirit that the Church finds the strength to renew herself always, carrying out a review of life on her way of being, asking forgiveness for her frailties and inadequacies, sparing no energies in placing herself at the service of all, with the sole intention of being faithful to the mission that the Lord has entrusted to her: living and announcing the Gospel.

4. Dear young people, the heart of the Church is young precisely because the Gospel is like a lifeblood that regenerates it continuously. It is up to us to be obedient and to cooperate in this fruitfulness. And all of you can collaborate in this fruitfulness: whether you are Catholic Christians, or of other religions, or non-believers. We ask you to collaborate in our fruitfulness, to give life. We also do it in this synodal journey, thinking of the situation of young people all over the world. We need to regain the enthusiasm of faith and the taste for research. We need to find again in the Lord the strength to recover from failures, to go forward, to strengthen our confidence in the future. And we need to dare to set out on new paths. Do not be afraid: dare to take new paths, even if this involves risks. A man or a woman who does not take risks, does not mature. An institution that makes choices not to risk remains a child and does not grow. Take risks, accompanied by caution, by counsel, but go ahead. Without risking, do you know what happens to a young person? He ages! He retires at 20! A young person ages, and the Church ages too. I say this with pain. How often I find Christian communities, even young ones, that are old. They have aged because they were afraid. Afraid of what? To go out, to go out to the existential peripheries of life, to go where the future is played out. One thing is prudence, which is a virtue, but another is fear. We need you young people, living stones of a Church with a young face, but not made up, as I said: not artificially rejuvenated, but revived from within. And you provoke us to emerge from the logic that says, "but it's always been like that". And that logic, please, is a poison. It is a sweet poison, because it calms your soul and leaves you as though you were anesthetized, unable to walk. Emerge from the logic of "it has always been done this way", so as to follow creatively the tracks of authentic, yet creative, Christian tradition. I recommend to Christians to read the Book of the Acts of the Apostles: the creativity of those men. Those men knew how to go ahead with a creativity that if we were to translate into what it means today, would frighten us! You create a new culture, but be careful: this culture can not be "uprooted". A step forward, but look at the roots! Do not go back to the roots, because you will end up buried: take a step forward, but always with roots. And the roots – for this, forgive me, I carry it in my heart – are the elderly, they are good elderly. The roots are grandparents. The roots are those who have lived their lives and that this culture of waste discards as they are not useful, it sends them away. The old ones have this charisma to provide roots. Talk to the elderly. "But what will I say?" Try! I remember in Buenos Aires, once, talking to young people, I said: "Why do not you go to a retirement home to play the guitar to the elderly who are there?" – "But, Father ..." – "Go, just for an hour". [They stayed] more than two hours! They did not want to leave, because the old men who were like that [a little sleepy], they heard the guitar and they woke up, they woke up, they woke up and started [talking], and the young people heard things that touched them inside. They took this wisdom and went ahead. This the Prophet Joel says so well, so well. In the third chapter. For me this is today's prophecy: "Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams". We need young prophets but be careful: you will never be prophets if you do not take the dreams of the elderly. Moreover: if you do not go and make an elderly person dream, an elderly person who is bored because no-one listens to him. Make the elderly dream and these dreams will help you to go ahead. Joel 2: 28. Read this, it will do you good. Let yourself be challenged by them.

In order to synchronize, on the same wavelength as the younger generations, close dialogue is of great help. I invite you, then, this week, to express yourselves frankly and freely, as I said and repeated. With a "hard face". You are the protagonists and it is important that you speak *openly*. "But I am embarrassed, the cardinal will hear me...". What does he hear? He is used to it. I assure you that your contribution will be taken seriously. I thank you now, and I ask you, please, not to forget to pray for me. And those who can not pray, because they do not know how to do so, at least think well of me. Thank you.

Greeting of Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri

Holiness,

You are welcomed in this hall by the overwhelming enthusiasm of over three hundred young people, who have arrived in Rome from all the continents. More than words, it is their smiles, their songs and their applause that count.

Each one, in the way that most suits, gives you his or her thanks today. Thank you, because you chose to dedicate the next General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to “Young people, faith and vocational discernment”, putting young people and their life project at the centre of the Church’s pastoral journey throughout the world.

Thank you, because you wanted the Synod “on” young people also to be in a certain way a Synod “for” young people, “with” young people, and “of” young people, in which all boys and girls can feel they are protagonists and express what they carry in their hearts, in the awareness that as you said in the beautiful Prayer Vigil for World Youth Day last year – “Every young person has something to say to others. He or she has something to say to adults, something to say to priests, sisters, bishops and even the Pope”.

Finally, thank you, because you wanted to convoke this pre-Synodal Meeting as a further stage in the path of preparation for the Synod, a stage that will genuinely allow many young people – those physically present here in Rome, but also those connected through social communication networks – to engage in dialogue, to openly discuss and to draft a shared document in view of the October Synodal Assembly.

Along with thanks, Holiness, we also offer you our most sincere wishes, since today, Solemnity of Saint Joseph, marks the fifth anniversary of the beginning of your Petrine Ministry: an anniversary that you give us the great gift of celebrating with us. In these five years you have shown us on very many occasions that the young are close to your heart: you have met them in Rome and in the countries you have visited during your Apostolic trips; you have urged them not to sever their roots with the history that precedes them; you have invited them to give their contribution to the renewal of the Church; you have embraced them and consoled them in hospitals, prisons, refugee camps and in all those places where the young must often become adults too soon.

The young people present here offer us, as far as possible, a cross-section of young people from all over the world. On the one hand, there are young people chosen by the Episcopal Conferences and the Synods of the Eastern Catholic Churches; on the other there are young people from the Seminaries and from the Houses of formation to the religious life; as well as members of associations, movements and new ecclesial communities; representatives of Catholic schools and universities. Then there are young people from the art world (music, dance, literature, theatre), from the professional world (journalism, research, information technology), from politics, the economy, military service, sport, and from the world of solidarity (voluntary work, disability, human trafficking, poverty, etc.). Finally, there are also young representatives of the other Christian Confessions, of other religions and non-believers.

In addition, during this week there will be along with the young people some experts from the world of youth, some facilitators, who will moderate the work in the Linguistic Groups, and some web workers, who will coordinate the distance participation of some young people enrolled via social networks. With regard to this latter, it is certainly a “sign of the times” that young people from all over the world, through the web, can participate in this event by sending their contributions and thus making their voice heard.

You yourself, Holy Father, indicated the purpose of this Pre-Synodal Meeting at the time of announcing its convocation: “With this journey, the Church wants to listen to the voice, sensitivities, the faith and also some of the doubts and criticism of the young — we must listen to young people —. This is why the conclusions of the

March meeting will be communicated to the Synod Fathers". The key word of the synodal journey is therefore the word "listening". At the same time, young people are the subject and object of the synodal journey, called to listen to their Pastors, but also called to speak to their Pastors, to open their hearts to them, in a virtuous cycle which is the very essence of ecclesial synodality.

Therefore, next Sunday, at the end of the Eucharist opening the rites of Holy Week and celebrating the XXXIII World Youth Day, we will have the joy and the honour of delivering in your hands the Document resulting from the Pre-Synodal Meeting, to which young people will entrust the wishes and hopes of their peers all over the world in view of the October Synod. Thank you!
