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BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIEGE
PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLIS

BOLLETTINO

SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

N. 230930d

Saturday 30.09.2023

“Together” Ecumenical Prayer Vigil in Saint Peter’s Square

This afternoon, in Saint Peter’s Square, the Ecumenical Prayer Vigil “Together”, presided over by Pope Francis, took place, on the eve of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, to be held from 4 to 29 October, on the theme “For a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission”.

The following is the homily delivered by the Holy Father during the celebration:

Homily of the Holy Father

“Together”. Like the early Christian community on the Day of Pentecost. Like one flock, loved and gathered by one Shepherd, Jesus. Like the great crowd in the Book of Revelation we are here, brothers and sisters “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (*Rev 7:9*), from different communities and countries, daughters and sons of the same Father, inspired by the Spirit received in baptism, and called to the same hope (cf. *Eph 4:4-5*).

Thank you for your presence. Thank you to the Taizé Community for this initiative. With great affection, I greet the Heads of Churches, the leaders and delegations of the different Christian traditions and all of you, especially the young people: thank you for coming to pray for us and with us, in Rome, prior to the Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, and on the eve of the spiritual retreat that precedes it. “*Syn-odos*”: let us walk together, not only Catholics, but all Christians, all of the baptized, the whole People of God, because “only the whole can be the unity of all” (cf. J.A. MÖHLER, *Symbolism*).

Like the great crowd in the Book of Revelation, we prayed in silence, listening to a “great silence” (cf. *Rev 8:1*). Indeed, silence is important and powerful: it can express unspeakable sorrow in the face of misfortune, but also, in moments of joy, a gladness that goes beyond words. That is why I would like to reflect briefly with you on its importance in the life of the believer, in the life of the Church and in the journey of Christian unity. The importance of silence.

First, silence is essential in the life of the believer. Indeed, it lies at the beginning and end of Christ's earthly existence. The Word, the Word of the Father, became "silence" in the manger and on the cross, on the night of the Nativity and on the night of his Passion. This evening, we Christians have been silent before the San Damiano Cross, as disciples listening before the cross, the Master's throne. Ours was not an empty silence, but a moment filled with faith, expectation and readiness. In a world full of noise, we are no longer accustomed to silence; indeed sometimes we struggle with it, because silence forces us to face God and ourselves. Yet it lies at the foundation of the word and of life. Saint Paul tells us that the mystery of the Incarnate Word was "kept secret for long ages" (*Rom 16:25*), teaching us that silence guards the mystery, as Abraham guarded the Covenant, as Mary guarded in her womb and pondered in her heart the life of her Son (cf. *Lk 1:31; 2:19.51*).

Moreover, truth does not need loud cries to reach people's hearts. God does not like declarations and shouting, gossiping and noise: rather, he prefers, as he did with Elijah, to speak in the "still small voice" (*1 Kings 19:12*), in a "thread of resounding silence". We too, then, like Abraham, like Elijah, like Mary, need to free ourselves from so much noise in order to hear his voice. For only in our silence does his word resound.

Second, silence is essential in the life of the Church. The Acts of the Apostles says that after Peter's discourse to the Council of Jerusalem, "the whole assembly kept silence" (*Acts 15:12*), preparing to receive the testimony of Paul and Barnabas about the signs and wonders God had performed among the nations. This reminds us that silence, in the ecclesial community, makes fraternal communication possible, where the Holy Spirit draws together points of view, because he *is* harmony. To be synodal is to welcome one another like this, in the knowledge that we all have something to share and to learn, gathering together to listen to the "Spirit of truth" (*Jn 14:17*) in order to know what the Lord "is saying to the churches" (*Rev 2:7*). What is more, silence enables true discernment, through attentive listening to the Spirit's "sighs too deep for words" (*Rom 8:26*) that echo, often hidden, within the People of God. Therefore, let us ask the Holy Spirit to bestow the gift of listening on the participants of the Synod: "listening to God, that with him we may hear the cry of the people; to listen to the people until breathing in the will to which God calls us" (*Address at the Prayer Vigil in Preparation for the Synod on the Family*, 4 October 2014).

Finally, the third element: silence is essential for the journey of Christian unity. Indeed, it is fundamental to prayer, and ecumenism begins with prayer and is sterile without it. Jesus himself prayed that his disciples "may all be one" (*Jn 17:21*). The silence that is prayer enables us to accept the gift of unity "as Christ wills it... by the means he chooses" (cf. ABBÉ COUTURIER, *Prayer for Unity*), not as the fruit of our own efforts and according to purely human criteria. The more we turn together to the Lord in prayer, the more we feel that it is he who purifies us and unites us beyond our differences. Christian unity grows in silence before the cross, just like the seeds we will receive, which represent the different gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit on the various traditions: it is up to us to sow them, in the certainty that God alone brings about the growth (cf. *1 Cor 3:6*). They will be a sign for us, who are called in turn quietly to die to selfishness in order, through the action of the Holy Spirit, to grow in communion with God and in fraternity among ourselves.

That is why, brothers and sisters, in common prayer we ask to learn again to be silent: to listen to the voice of the Father, the call of Jesus and the groaning of the Spirit. Let us ask that the Synod be a *kairós* of fraternity, a place where the Holy Spirit will purify the Church from gossip, ideologies and polarization. As we approach the important anniversary of the great Council of Nicaea, let us ask that we may know how, like the Magi, to worship in unity and in silence the mystery of God made man, certain that the closer we are to Christ, the more united we will be among ourselves. And as the wise men from the East were led to Bethlehem by a star, so may the heavenly light guide us to our one Lord and to the unity for which he prayed. Brothers and sisters, let us set out together, eager to meet him, worship him and proclaim him, "so that the world may believe" (*Jn 17:21*).
