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BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIEGE
PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS

BOLLETTINO

SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

N. 231004e

Wednesday 04.10.2023

Synod23 – 1st General Congregation of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops

Greeting from His Beatitude Ibrahim Isaac Sedrak

Speech by His Eminence Cardinal Mario Grech

Speech by His Eminence Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, S.J.

At 16.15 this afternoon, in the presence of the Holy Father Francis, in the Paul VI Hall in the Vatican, the 1st General Congregation of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, on the theme “For a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission” (4 to 29 October 2023) began.

The following is the greeting from His Beatitude Ibrahim Isaac Sedrak, president delegate, Patriarch of Alexandria of the Copts, Head of the Synod of the Coptic Catholic Church, Egypt; the speech by His Eminence Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary general of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops; and the speech by His Eminence Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, S.J., archbishop of Luxembourg, general rapporteur:

Greeting from His Beatitude Ibrahim Isaac Sedrak

Holy Father,

Dear Beatitudes, Eminences, Excellencies, dear sisters and brothers,

The Lord Jesus Christ continues to show his love for the Church, inspiring in her in this historic time a synod for a synodal Church: communion, participation, mission. On behalf of all the people of God, and us, gathered here

today in this synodal assembly, I offer you my warmest fraternal greetings. We thank you because with the celebration of this synod you give us the joy of meeting and walking together.

We have come after a long journey of two years to this 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. We must confess, Your Holiness, that it was not easy at the beginning. Many among us felt a little disoriented, not only because of the new way in which we experienced the synod, but also because synodality touches the life of the Church, and talking about life is not easy.

In previous synods we went down familiar paths, we had general guidelines ready. But this time, the synodal assembly was prepared by a consultation of the people of God, of every single baptized person, each according to his or her own charism, in an even livelier, more real and tangible manner.

Moreover, the core was: walking together, listening and discerning what the Holy Spirit is telling us, without any itinerary, or predetermined path. Discovering together, day by day, the way to travel.

Therefore, while on the one hand it was not easy, the preparation of the synod was a fantastic experience, thanks be to the Holy Spirit, who let us experience and live synodality even before talking about it.

We began to rediscover the importance of walking together, of reciprocal listening, and common prayer to discern the action of the Holy Spirit in the Church and in the world.

Listening inspired in us the grace of sincere recognition of the need for a permanent conversation, that reminds us that we and our structures are not the point of reference of the action and salvific work of God, but it is Christ, who by means of His Holy Spirit, frees us from our enslavement, our fears, and our isolation, and gives us the grace to experience the fullness of life and love.

The world expects from us the witness of the risen Christ, of life and of hope. May the centrality of Christ therefore be the guiding thread of this Synod. May He be the Alpha and Omega of our discussions, may He be the light that illuminates our debates, may He be the final goal of all our efforts. Only in this way will the Synod succeed in achieving its own goals.

Let us therefore ask the Lord, who knows our hearts and the needs of His Church, to manifest His holy will to us, to grant us the courage to walk together and be willing to let the Spirit purify our ideas and ambitions.

Let us learn from Mary, "Mother of God and of the Church", that the only way to reach our aims is the one She herself showed us: to listen to Christ and to "do whatever tells you" (cf. *Jn* 2:5). May Mary guide our steps and be in our midst, as she was with the first disciples.

Thank you.

Speech by His Eminence Cardinal Mario Grech

*Behold, how good and pleasant it is
when brothers dwell in unity!
It is like the precious oil upon the head,
running down upon the beard,
upon the beard of Aaron,
running down on the collar of his robes! [...]*

For there the Lord has commanded the blessing,

life for evermore. (Psalm 133, 1)

Like the tribes of Israel who ascend Mount Zion (cf. Psalm 121), we have come from all the Churches throughout the world, to praise the name of the Lord. After the first phase of the Synod, we are celebrating this General Assembly to offer our contribution, so that everyone in the Church may become “missionary disciples who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 24). A few weeks ago, my mother asked me why I “waste” so much time in the offices of the Secretariat if this does not help me to preach the Gospel! She was right! And I do not want to forget this question of hers, not even now that we are called to pause dynamically in prayer and listening for an entire month.

Today the Church finds herself at a crossroads, and the urgent challenge, strictly speaking, is not of a theological or ecclesiological nature, but how in this moment in history the Church may become a sign and instrument of God’s love for every man and woman. Saint Catherine of Siena, in her *Dialogue*, where she also expresses her desire for the “reformation” of the Church, reports these words she received from the Lord: “I want to be served by you with infinite things, and all you have that is infinite is love” (XCII). God’s love is the medicine that can heal today’s wounded humanity, and as the Church our mission is to be a sign of this love.

Having concluded the first phase, we can say that along the way our vigour has grown (cf. *Ps* 84:8) not only because we have encountered a faithful people, God’s holy people who truly love Jesus and His Church, but also because it has emerged that many people, even among the “baptized whose lives do not reflect the demands of Baptism” (Benedict XVI, Homily, 28 October 2012), are in search of the meaning of life and joy, and implore the Church to show them the beautiful and merciful face of Jesus. Our vigour has also grown because in this synodal journey, although it has not always been easy and there has been no lack of difficulties and misunderstandings, we have been educated in the synodal experience of “walking together”.

In these two years, I have met pastors and church communities who at first were wary, but after having had this experience and having found the presence of Jesus among brothers and sisters who love one another (cf. *Mt* 18:20), today they praise the Lord for this gift of synodality. I have also encountered this in very remote environments, such as among the K’iche’ people.

The entire Church and everyone in the Church have had the opportunity to participate in the synodal process, each one “according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (*Eph* 4:7). Today we can attest to the truth of the vision of the Church proposed by Pope Francis in his address on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Synod of Bishops: “A synodal Church is a Church which listens” (Pope Francis, *Address on the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015).

We have a body of texts that mark the stages of the synodal process so far and make manifest the growth from stage to stage in a synodal style and form of Church. If the published documents refer to moments in which the People of God and its Pastors have lived an intense experience of synodality, all the more reason for this Assembly to be a strong sign of synodality for the Church today, listening to the Word of God, in the light of Tradition, in order to understand God’s will for today. Due to the fact that it is celebrated in Rome, at “the Chair of Peter, which presides over the whole assembly of charity” (*Lumen gentium* 13), our Assembly is like *the city placed on the mountain, the lamp placed on the candelabrum so that it may give light to those in the house* (cf. *Mt* 5:14-15).

Here more than elsewhere what John Chrysostom states must be made clear: “Church and Synod are synonymous” (*Explicatio in Ps.* 149, *PG* 55, 493). Even if this Assembly cannot be considered a full representation of the Church because it does not bring together in Synod the entire College of Bishops, it is nevertheless a clear manifestation of the ecclesial *communio* that takes on, as *Praedicate Evangelium* says, “the face of synodality” (*Praedicate Evangelium* 4).

Here appears the unity of the episcopate around the Bishop of Rome, “perpetual and visible principle and foundation of unity of both the bishops and of the faithful” (LG 23). Saint Paul VI established the Synod of Bishops as a body capable of realizing the participation of the Catholic episcopate in the concern for the whole

Church. It is precisely the second phase, the one that *Episcopalis communio* qualifies as "celebratory" (*EC*, Art. 4), that is responsible for a more direct function of council, in which, "the bishops act as authentic guardians, interpreters and witnesses of the faith of the whole Church, which they need to discern carefully from the changing currents of public opinion" (Pope Francis, *Address on the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015).

Here the Church as *communio Ecclesiarum* appears. Although not all the bishops, the "visible principle and foundation of unity in their particular churches" (*LG* 23), are present, the fact that most of the Pastors are appointed by the Bishops' Conferences shows the very close bond of this Assembly with the particular Churches and their groupings. This bond confirms that the synodal process is based on the principle of "mutual interiority" between the universal Church and the particular Churches. In this logic of continuous circularity, the discernment required of this Assembly is not an act isolated from the synodal process, but closely linked to the consultation of the People of God in the particular Churches and the subsequent moments of discernment in the Bishops' Conferences, in the hierarchical structures of the Eastern Catholic Churches *sui iuris* and in the Continental Assemblies. As early as 1973, Yves Congar wrote that theology and canon law "will henceforth have to be cultivated more from the point of view of the People of God and possibly by the episcopate and the local Churches" (*Infallibility and Indefectibility*, in: *Ministries and Ecclesial Communion*, Bologna 1973, p. 157). To understand this logic of circularity, it is enough to recall that the *Instrumentum laboris* with which we will be working is the fruit of this "listening process conducted at every level of the Church's life" (Pope Francis, *Address on the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015); in this dynamism it was made clear how the one and only Church exists in and from the particular Churches (cf. *LG* 23). The second phase of the Synod, which opens with this Assembly, is called to show the Church as one and only one, the *Ecclesia tota*, in which the richness and variety of gifts, charisms, ministries, vocations is translated into reciprocal listening, into gifts given and received, to the point of being able to experience even today "one heart and soul" (Acts 4:32).

Here also appears the unity of the People of God with its Pastors. For the first time, in fact, there are sisters and brothers present who are not vested with the episcopal *munus*: laymen and laywomen, religious men and women, deacons and priests who are no longer "exceptions to the norm", but full members of the Assembly. They are here not because they represent the People of God: although the number 70 evokes for biblical man the totality of peoples, no delegation could ever adequately represent the totality of the People of God, the subject of the *sensus fidei*. But these sisters and brothers remind us by their very presence of the unity of the synodal process: that is why their participation is full, as effective members of the Assembly.

If we live all this, the Assembly will be for the whole Church an exemplary image of the "*plebs adunata de unitate Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti*" (*LG* 4; "a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit"), a sign of unity that shows believers to return to being that community described in the Acts of the Apostles that, mindful of the Paschal event, tirelessly and together sows the Gospel.

In analogy to what the Council says about the Church as sacrament (cf. *LG* 1), this Assembly is also called in a certain way to be a sign and instrument. In its synodal form, the Assembly can be a visible sign of *communio*, the principle that governs ecclesial life at all levels - *communio fidelium*, *communio Ecclesiarum*, *communio hierarchica*. On the other hand, as the Holy Father reminds us, "when we take sides ... when we adopt rigid and airtight positions, when we become locked into our own ideas and ways of doing things, perhaps even thinking that we are better than others ... we choose the part over the whole" (Pope Francis, *Homily on the Solemnity of Pentecost*, 4 June 2017). Let us ask the Spirit that the differences in vocations, ministries and states of life, the richness of gifts and charisms, the harmonious diversity, be at the service of the unity of the Assembly. In this way the Assembly will be a sign. And it will also be a more capable instrument of the service it is called to render to the Church and the world.

None of those of us here today - Members, Fraternal Delegates, Special Invitees, Experts and Facilitators, Secretariat Staff - are present in a personal capacity. *Cum et sub Petro*, we are here to continue listening to the basic question that has underpinned the entire synodal process: "...what steps is the Spirit inviting us to take as a synodal Church?" (*DP* 2). It is up to this Assembly to ask itself - on a universal level - about the Church's "walking together", in the certainty that "it is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of

the third millennium" (Francis, *Address on the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015).

So, happy walking and happy listening!

Speech by His Eminence Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, S.J.

Holy Father,

Beatitudes,

Your Eminencies, Your Excellencies,

dear brothers and sisters,

The setting of this aula might seem unusual to many of you. So, let me start with a reflection on this place.

We are not sitting in hierarchical order but at round tables, which is a way to foster genuine sharing and authentic discernment. The aula is not arranged in this way for practical reasons or because of a decision by the Secretariate of the Synod. It mirrors the experience of the people of God along the synodal path that started in 2021. Both the order in which we sit and the *Instrumentum laboris* are the fruit of this synodal experience and help us discern which way God is asking us to go.

The Synod process the whole Church has gone through since 2021 is the constant reference point for our work during this Assembly. Bishops who were not very active in the process but have been elected by their Conferences to this 16th General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops may face challenges at the beginning. On the other hand, there are the members who are not bishops. Many among them were particularly involved in the Continental Stage of this Synod and are called to testify their experience.

Round tables also remind us that none of us is a star in this Synod. The protagonist is the Holy Spirit, and only with a heart fully open to the Spirit's guidance will we be able to respond to the call we have received as Synod members. Speaking about the Holy Spirit does not mean we forget our focus on Christ. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit makes Christ present among us here, as he did in the Eucharist we have celebrated together. God the Father, through the Holy Spirit, brings us into communion with Christ crucified and risen.

The Church is the people of God, walking through history, with Christ in her midst. It is only normal that there is a group walking at His right, another at His left, while some run ahead and others lag behind. When each of these groups looks at Christ our Lord, together with Him they cannot help but see the group that is doing the opposite: those walking on the right will see those walking on the left, those running ahead will see those lagging behind. In other words, the so-called progressive cannot look at Christ without seeing the so-called conservatives with Him and vice-versa. Nevertheless, the important thing is not the group to which we seem to belong to, but walking with Christ within His Church.

This Church is not made up of only the ordained, bishops, priests and deacons, but by all the baptized who participate in the mission that our Lord Jesus Christ entrusted to Her. Therefore, mission plays a key role in the notion of synodality. In order to grasp the reality of the mission of the Church we need to broaden our vision, from this aula to the whole world.

The world suffers in pain, the earth, our mother and sister, is crying and so are the poor. The Holy Father could not be more vocal in spelling out the evils plaguing our world: climate change – thank you Holy Father for the

new exhortation *Laudate Deum* –, migration, so many wars, extreme polarization in society and also within the Church, and a consumeristic lifestyle which in the end seems to deny the existence of God. Millions of people are suffering. Sound sociological, political and economic analyses are necessary, and generous commitment is necessary. However, no analysis or commitment can succeed if we do not recognise that sin is the root of these evils. This is why the Holy Father is so vocal in calling us to conversion, a conversion which changes our daily behaviour.

This is the context in which the Church receives the call to become more and more synodal. We do not start from scratch. We already have a rich theological tradition on synodality, and we have the magisterium of many Popes, and now also the deep teaching of Pope Francis.

We are called to learn the grammar of synodality. Just like the grammar of our languages changes as they develop, so does the grammar of synodality: it changes with time. Therefore, reading of the signs of our time should help us discover a grammar of synodality for our time. In grammar there are some basic rules which never change. For us, these are the rules of Catholicity, such as the dignity stemming from Baptism; the role of Peter in the Church; episcopal collegiality; ordained ministry, the common priesthood of the faithful and their interrelation (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 10). With these fundamental elements of our Catholic grammar, we have to find the way to express the new insights the Holy Spirit gives us.

While working to accomplish this task we have always to keep in mind that a Synod is not a Parliament! In Parliament, politicians discuss text A proposed by the majority. The opposition then proposes text B. In the best cases, some points of B will be integrated into A... at least until new elections may swap positions. But, in any case, it is a narrow majority who decides what the whole population has to accept. Some will feel that they have won, other that they have lost. And they will try to resist.

We have one text to start from: the *Instrumentum laboris*. It is the fruit of the synodal process which has involved the whole People of God. The process is not finished; it is now entrusted to our discernment. It should not be a battle between position A and B. Through genuine discernment, the Holy Spirit opens our minds and our hearts to new positions, leaving A and B behind!

Having considered what our work is not - a parliamentary debate - it is good to be clear about what it is: a common work of discernment. Just like the layout of the aula, the time we will spend together is organised in such a way as to facilitate our work. We have already experienced a fundamental moment: the retreat that opened the Assembly. We cannot discern together without praying together. This is why I invite everyone to keep the inner disposition and fruits of the retreat in their hearts. To help us do this, over the coming weeks we will experience other moments of common spirituality, and each day we can celebrate the Eucharist together next door, in St. Peter's Basilica, in the morning, before the beginning of our sessions.

You already know a lot about the organisation of the work during the coming weeks, because you received information about it from the General Secretariat in August. In brief, our work will be divided into five modules. The first four will be devoted to discernment on the issues proposed in the *Instrumentum laboris*, following the order of its parts (Sections A, B1, B2, B3) and using the Worksheets prepared for this purpose. The one for the work on Section A, which we are beginning today, was distributed to you in Sacrofano. You can find the others in the *Instrumentum laboris*. The final module will instead be devoted to the discussion and approval of the synthesis report, which we will then hand over to the Holy Father.

Each module will see the alternation of moments in plenary assembly, the General Congregations, and group work, or *Circuli Minores*. In this way, our discernment will benefit both from the deepening made possible by working in small groups, and from the dialogue on a universal scale that is the characteristic and the privilege of an Assembly such as ours.

In continuity with the journey of the People of God over the past two years, the work in the *Circuli Minores* will follow the method of conversation in the Spirit. I will not dwell on an explanation of this because we have already experienced it in Sacrofano in the work that took place in the afternoons. Instead, I would like to take this

opportunity to thank the facilitators, whose vigilance over the method and respect for time-keeping allows us to concentrate on the questions that are the subject of our discernment. I would like to include here my thanks to the experts, who will have the certainly demanding task of progressively synthesising the fruits of the work of the *Circuli Minores* and the General Congregations in view of the drafting of the synthesis report on which we will work in the concluding module.

One of the strengths of the method of conversation in the Spirit is that it allows the expression of everyone's point of view, enhancing consonances without neglecting differences, but above all discouraging polarisations and polemics. As the Holy Father wrote recently, "In the conversation in the Spirit we find a way of participation oriented towards communion and renewal of mission, which encourages the participation of all and welcomes in communion and unity the great diversity that we are¹." It aims to build consensus without dividing into factions or crushing into uniformity. In this way it fosters the passage from listening to one another to listening to the Spirit. As the *Instrumentum laboris* explains, "The interior traces that result from one's listening to sisters and brothers are the language with which the Holy Spirit makes his own voice resound. The more each participant has been nourished by meditation on the Word and the Sacraments, growing in familiarity with the Lord, the more he or she will be able to recognise the sound of His voice (cf. Jn 10:14.27), assisted also by the accompaniment of the Magisterium and theology" (n. 38). Within this framework, the meaning of the consensus reached also changes. For example, at the end of each module, after the work in groups and the discussion in plenary, each of the *Circuli Minores* will be called upon to draw up a Report of the work done, expressing what there is agreement on, but also any differences or questions on which to continue reflection. On this Report, the group will be called upon to express a consensus, which is first and foremost the recognition that it faithfully represents the work carried out together, with the respect for each person that the profound listening envisaged by the method requires and at the same time encourages. For these reasons, the method of conversation in the Spirit seems particularly suited to the objective and style of this Assembly.

My heartfelt hope is that during this month's work we can develop a road map for the following year, that we will then entrust to the Holy Father. Ideally this road map should indicate where we feel consensus has been reached among us and above all within the People of God, laying down possible steps to undertake as a response to the voice of the Spirit. But it should also say where deeper reflection is needed and what could help that process of reflection.

Thank you for accepting the call to be members of this Assembly. Thank you for your trust in the Holy Spirit, thank you for your readiness to listen to one another as children of the same Father, brothers and sisters in Christ.

¹ Pope Francis, "Prólogo", in Guerrero Alves J. A. – Martín López O., *Conversación espiritual, discernimiento y sinodalidad*, Editorial Sal Terrae, Maliaño (Cantabria), 2023, p. 10. [Original Spanish text: En la conversación en el Espíritu encontramos una vía de participación orientada a la comunión y renovación de la misión, que alienta la participación de todos y acoge en la comunión y en la unidad la gran diversidad que somos.]
