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BOLLETTINO

HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIÈGE PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE SALA DE IMPRENSA DA SANTA SÉ
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N. 241002b

Wednesday 02.10.2024

#synod24 – Holy Mass for the opening of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops

At 9.30 this morning, in Saint Peter's Square, the Holy Father Francis presided over Holy Mass on the occasion of the opening of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, on the theme: "For a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission".

After the proclamation of the Gospel, the Pope delivered the following homily:

Homily of the Holy Father

Today we celebrate the liturgical Memorial of the Holy Guardian Angels, and we re-open the Plenary Session of the Synod of Bishops. After listening to the Word of God, let us take three images as starting points for our consideration: voice, refuge and a child.

First, the *voice*. On the way to the Promised Land, God advises the people to listen to the "voice of the angel" whom he had sent (cf. *Ex* 23:20-22). It is an image that is relevant to us. As we walk down the path of this Synod, the Lord places in our hands the history, dreams and hopes of a great people. They are our sisters and brothers scattered throughout the world, inspired by the same faith, moved by the same desire for holiness. With them and for them, let us strive to understand the path we must follow in order to reach the destination the Lord desires for us. But how can we listen to the "voice of the angel"?

One way is to receive all the contributions collected during these three years with respect and attention, in prayer and in the light of the Word of God. These have been years of work, sharing and discussion, carried out with a constant effort to purify our minds and hearts. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we must listen to and understand these voices — that is, the ideas, the expectations, the proposals — so as to discern together the voice of God speaking to the Church (cf. Renato Corti, *Quale prete?*, Appunti inediti). As we have repeatedly stressed, ours is not a parliamentary assembly, but rather a place of listening in communion, where, as Saint Gregory the Great says, what someone has in himself or herself partially is possessed completely by another,

and although some have particular gifts, everything belongs to everyone in the “charity of the Spirit” (cf. Homilies on the Gospels, XXXIV).

For this to happen, there is a condition: we must free ourselves from everything that prevents the “charity of the Spirit” from creating harmony in diversity in us and among us. Those who arrogantly claim to have the exclusive right to hear the voice of the Lord cannot hear it (cf. *Mk* 9:38-39). Every word is to be received with gratitude and simplicity and can become an echo of what God has given for the good of our brothers and sisters (cf. *Mt* 10:7-8). Let us be careful not to see our contributions as points to defend at all costs or agendas to be imposed. I hope each of us will offer our contribution as a gift to be shared, ready even to sacrifice our own point of view in order to give life to something new, all according to God’s plan. Otherwise we will end up locking ourselves into dialogues among the deaf, where participants seek to advance their own causes or agendas without listening to others and, above all, without listening to the voice of the Lord.

We do not have the solutions to the problems we face, but the Lord does (cf. *Jn* 14:6). Remember that you cannot lose focus in the desert. If you do not pay attention to the guide, if you think you are self-sufficient, you may die of hunger or thirst and take others with you. Let us therefore listen to the voice of God and of his angel so that we may go safely on our way, rising above our limitations and difficulties (cf. *Ps* 23:4).

This brings us to the next image: refuge, which can be symbolized by wings that protect us – “under his wings you will find refuge” (*Ps* 91:4). Wings are powerful instruments, able to lift a body off the ground through vigorous movement. Although they represent great strength, wings can also be lowered in order to gather, becoming a shield and a welcoming nest for the young birds who are in need of warmth and protection.

This is a symbol of what God does for us, and it is also a model for us to follow, especially as we gather together these days. Among us, dear brothers and sisters, there are many strong, well-prepared people, capable of rising to the heights with the intense movements of reflection and with brilliant insights. All this is a great advantage to us. It stimulates, challenges and sometimes forces us to think more openly and to move forward more decisively. It also helps us to remain firm in our faith even in the face of challenges and difficulties. We must have open hearts, hearts in dialogue. A heart that is closed in personal convictions is not proper to the Spirit of the Lord. It is not of the Lord. It is a gift to open ourselves, and this gift must be combined, when necessary, with the ability to relax our muscles and bend down to offer each other a welcoming embrace and a place of refuge. That way we will be, as Saint Paul VI said, “a house [...] of brothers and sisters, a workshop of intense activity, a cenacle of ardent spirituality” (*Address to the Presidential Council of the C.E.I.*, 9 May 1974).

The more we realise that we are surrounded by friends who love, respect and appreciate us, friends who want to listen to what we have to say, the more we will feel free to express ourselves spontaneously and openly.

This approach is not just a technique for “facilitating” dialogue and group communication dynamics. In the Synod there are “facilitators”, but they are here to help us move forward better. Embracing, protecting and caring are in fact part of the very nature of the Church. Embracing, protecting and caring. The Church, by its very vocation, is a welcoming place of gathering, where “collegial charity demands perfect harmony, which leads to moral strength, spiritual beauty and ideal expression” (*ibid.*). Harmony: it is a very important word. It is not about majorities and minorities; that could be a first step. What is important, what is fundamental, is harmony, the harmony that only the Holy Spirit can achieve. The Holy Spirit is the master of harmony and is capable of creating one voice among so many different voices. Consider how the Spirit created harmony among differences on the morning of Pentecost. The Church needs “peaceful and open places” to be created first of all in our hearts, where each person feels welcomed, like an infant in a mother’s arms (cf. *Is* 49:15; 66:13) and as a child lifted up to a father’s cheek (cf. *Hos* 11:4; *Ps* 103:13).

This brings us to the third image: a child. It is Jesus himself who, in the Gospel, “put a child in the midst of them”, showing him to the disciples, inviting them to convert and become small like him. They had asked him who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven and he replied by encouraging them to become small like a child. But not only this, Jesus also adds that by welcoming a child in his name, we welcome him (cf. *Mt* 18:1-5).

This paradox is essential for us. Given the importance of a Synod, in a certain sense we must try to be “great” in spirit, in heart, in outlook, because the issues that we must deal with are “great” and delicate, and the situations are broad and universal. But it is precisely for this reason that we must not lose sight of the child, whom Jesus continues to place at the centre of our meetings and work tables. He does so to remind us that the only way to be worthy of the task entrusted to us is to lower ourselves, to make ourselves small and to receive one another humbly. The greatest in the Church is the one who bends down the lowest.

Precisely by making himself small, God “shows us what true greatness, indeed, what it means to be God” (BENEDICT XVI, *Homily for the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord*, 11 January 2009). It is not by chance that Jesus says that children’s angels “always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven” (*Mt* 18:10). In other words, they are like a “telescope” of the Father’s love.

Brothers and sisters, we begin anew our synodal path with an eye toward the world, since the Christian community is always at the service of humanity in order to announce the joy of the Gospel. In such a dramatic time in our history, when the winds of war and the flames of violence continue to devastate entire peoples and nations, there is need for this message.

In order to invoke the intercession of Mary Most Holy for the gift of peace, I will recite the holy rosary and make a heartfelt plea to the Virgin in the Basilica of Saint Mary Major this coming Sunday. If possible, I ask all members of the Synod to join me for this occasion.

The following day, 7 October, I ask everyone to participate in a day of prayer and fasting for peace in the world.

Let us walk together. Let us listen to the Lord and allow him to guide us by the “breath” of the Spirit.
