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#synod24 – First General Congregation: Address of the Holy Father at the opening of the Second Session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops

The following is the address delivered by the Holy Father Francis this afternoon, in the Paul VI Hall, at the opening of the Second Session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

Ever since the Church of God was “convened in Synod” in October 2021, we have travelled together a part of the lengthy journey to which God the Father constantly calls his people. He sends them to every nation to bring the glad tidings that Jesus Christ is our peace (cf. *Eph 2:14*) and he confirms them in their mission through the Holy Spirit.

This Assembly, guided by the Holy Spirit, who “bends the stubborn heart and will, melts the frozen, warms the chill, and guides the steps that go astray”, aims to help bring about a synodal Church, a Church in mission, capable of setting out, making herself present in today’s geographical and existential peripheries, and seeking to enter into a relationship with everyone in Jesus Christ, our brother and Lord.

A homily by a spiritual author of the fourth century [1] can serve to summarize what happens when the Holy Spirit begins to work, beginning with Baptism, which bestows equal dignity on all. The experiences that our author describes can allow us to appreciate what has happened over these three years, and what is yet to come.

First, he helps us understand that the Holy Spirit is a sure guide and that our first task is to learn how to discern his voice, since he speaks through everyone and in all things. Has this synodal process made us experience this?

The Holy Spirit always accompanies us. The Spirit consoles us in moments of sorrow and grief, especially when – precisely because of our love of humanity – things are not going well, injustices seem to prevail, we realize how difficult it is to respond with good in the face of evil, we see how hard it is to forgive and what little courage we show in seeking peace. It seems in these moments that there is nothing more to do and we yield to despair. Just as hope is the humblest and strongest virtue, despair is its counterpart.

The Holy Spirit wipes away our tears and comforts us because he communicates God's gift of hope. God never grows weary; his love is tireless.

The Holy Spirit penetrates to the part of us that so often is like a courtroom, where we launch accusations and pass judgments, mostly of condemnation. The author of our homily tells us that the Holy Spirit kindles in those who receive him a fire, a "fire of such love and exultation that, were it possible, we would clasp in our embrace all mankind, without discrimination, good and bad alike". This is because God always embraces everyone. Let us not forget, everyone, everyone everyone, and always. He offers everyone new possibilities in life, even up to the last moment. That is why we must always forgive others, since readiness to do so is born of our own experience of having been forgiven. There is only one who cannot forgive: the one who was not forgiven.

Yesterday, during the Penance Service we had that experience. We asked for forgiveness; we acknowledged that we are sinners. We put aside our pride, and we set aside our presumption in imagining that we are better than others. Have we in fact become more humble?

Humility too is a gift of the Holy Spirit that we must ask from him. Humility, as the etymology of the word tells us, brings us back to earth, to the ground, the *humus*, and thus reminds us of the beginning, when, if not for the breath of the Creator, we would have remained lifeless mud. Humility allows us to look at the world around us and to realize that we are no better than others. As Saint Paul says: "Do not think too highly of yourselves" (*Rom 12:16*). We cannot be humble apart from love. Christians ought to be like those women described by Dante Alighieri in one of his Sonnets. They are women who grieve the loss of their friend Beatrice's father: "You who bear humble semblance, with eyes downcast, showing sorrow" (*Vita Nuova XXII, 9*). This is the humility, sympathetic and compassionate, of those who see themselves as brothers and sisters to all. They suffer their pain, and in their own woundedness and hurt they see the wounds and the sufferings of our Lord.

I encourage you to meditate in prayer on this fine spiritual text and to realize that the Church – *semper reformanda* – cannot pursue her journey and let herself be renewed without the Holy Spirit and his surprises. Without letting herself be shaped by the hands of God the Creator, his Son Jesus Christ and his Holy Spirit, as Saint Irenaeus of Lyon tells us (*Adv. Haer.*, IV, 20, 1).

From the very beginning, when God brought forth man and woman from the earth; from the time when God called Abraham to be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth and called Moses to lead through the desert a people delivered from slavery; from when the Virgin Mary said "yes" to the message that made her the Mother of the Son of God according to the flesh and the Mother of every disciple and every disciple of her Son; and from when the Lord Jesus, crucified and risen, poured out his Holy Spirit at Pentecost – ever since, we have been journeying, as "those who have been shown mercy", towards the definitive fulfilment of the Father's love. Let us not forget that we have been shown mercy.

We know both the beauty of that journey and the fatigue that it entails. We are making it together, as a people that, also in our own day, are a sign and instrument of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race (*Lumen Gentium*, 1). We are making it together with, and for the sake of, every man and woman of good will, in each of whom grace is invisibly at work (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22). We are making it, convinced of the "relational" nature of the Church and seeking to ensure that the relationships given to us and entrusted to our responsible creativity will always be a sign of the gratuitousness of mercy. A so-called Christian who does not enter into the gratuitousness and mercy of God is simply an atheist dressed as a Christian. The mercy of God enables us to be trustworthy and responsible.

Sisters, brothers, we persevere on this journey fully aware that we are called, like a pale moon that reflects the

light of Christ our sun, to take up, faithfully and joyfully, our mission to be for the world a sacrament of that light, which is not our own.

The 16th Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, now in its Second Session, represents this “journeying together” of the people of God in a distinctive way.

The intuition of Pope Saint Paul VI, when he instituted the Synod of Bishops in 1965, has proved most fruitful. In the sixty years that have intervened, we have learned to see in the Synod of Bishops a symphonic “plural subject” capable of supporting the continuing mission of the Church Catholic, effectively assisting the Bishop of Rome in his service to the communion of all the Churches and to the Church as a whole.

Saint Paul VI was well aware that “this Synod, like all human institutions, can be improved upon with the passing of time” (*Apostolica Sollicitudo*). The Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio* intended to build on the experience of the various synodal Assemblies (Ordinary, Extraordinary, Special) by explicitly presenting the synodal Assembly as a process and not just an event.

The synodal process is also a learning process, in the course of which the Church comes to know herself better and to identify the forms of pastoral activity best suited to the mission entrusted to her by her Lord. This learning process also includes the ways that the ministry of Pastors, and Bishops in particular, is exercised.

In choosing to convene as full members of this 16th Assembly also a significant number of lay and consecrated persons (men and women), deacons and priests, developing what was already in part envisaged for previous Assemblies, I acted in continuity with the understanding of the exercise of the episcopal ministry set forth by the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. The Bishop, the principle and visible foundation of unity of each particular Church, cannot carry out his ministry except within the People of God and with the People of God, preceding, standing in the midst of, and following that portion of God’s People entrusted to his care. This inclusive understanding of the episcopal ministry is meant to be clearly seen, while avoiding two dangers. First, an abstractness that would ignore the concrete fruitfulness of differing places and relationships, and the value of each individual. Second, the danger of breaking communion by pitting the hierarchy against the lay faithful. It is certainly not a matter of replacing one with the other, rallying to the cry: “Now it is our turn!” No, this does not work: “now it is up to we the lay faithful”, “now it is up to we priests”. No, this does not work. Rather, we are being asked to work together symphonically, in a composition that unites all of us in the service of God’s mercy, in accordance with the different ministries and charisms that the Bishop is charged to acknowledge and promote.

This “journeying together” with everyone, everyone, is a process in which the Church, in docility to the working of the Holy Spirit and sensitive to in reading the signs of the times (*Gaudium et Spes*, 4), continually renews herself and perfects her sacramentality. In this way, she strives to be a credible witness to the mission to which she has been called, to gather all the peoples of the earth into one, when at last God himself will give us a seat at the banquet he has prepared (cf. *Is* 25:6-10).

The composition of this 16th Assembly is thus more than a contingent fact. It expresses a way of exercising the episcopal ministry consistent with the living Tradition of the Church and with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. Never can a Bishop, or any other Christian, think of himself “without others”. Just as no one is saved alone, the proclamation of salvation needs everyone, and requires that everyone to be heard.

The presence in the Assembly of the Synod of Bishops of members who are not Bishops does not diminish the “episcopal” dimension of the Assembly. I do not say this because of some whirlwind of gossip that has gone from one side to another. Still less does it place any limitation on, or derogate from, the authority proper to individual Bishops and the College of Bishops. Rather, it points to the form that the exercise of episcopal authority is called to take in a Church that is conscious of being essentially relational and therefore synodal. Relationship with Christ and with all in Christ – those already there and those not yet there but are awaited by the Father – realizes the substance and shapes the form of the Church at all times.

Differing forms of a “collegial” and “synodal” exercise of the episcopal ministry (within the particular Churches, in

groupings of Churches and in the Church as a whole) need to be identified in due course. They must always respect the deposit of faith and the living Tradition, and always respond to what the Spirit asks of the Churches at this particular time and in the different contexts in which they live. Let us not forget that the Spirit is harmony. Let us think of the morning of Pentecost. There was tremendous disorder but he brought harmony to that disorder. Let us not forget that he is truly harmony. It is not a sophisticated or intellectual harmony. It is everything, an existential harmony.

The Holy Spirit makes the Church perennially faithful to the mandate of the Lord Jesus Christ and attentive to his word. The Spirit leads the disciples into all truth (*Jn* 16:13). He is also leading us, gathered in the Holy Spirit in this Assembly, to give an answer, after three years of walking (wandering in the desert?), to the question of “How to be a synodal Church in mission”. I would add merciful.

With a heart filled with hope and gratitude, and conscious of the demanding task entrusted to you – to us – I express my prayerful hope that all will open themselves willingly to the action of the Holy Spirit, our sure guide and comforter. Thank you!

[1] *Homily XVIII*, 7-11: PG 34, 639-642. [Office of Readings for Friday of the Fourth Week of Ordinary Time].
