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#synod24 – First General Congregation of the Second Session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops

The First General Congregation of the Second Session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, on the theme: “For a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission” (2 to 27 October 2024) began at 16.00 today in the Vatican’s Paul VI Hall, in the presence of the Holy Father Francis.

The following is the greeting from the delegate president, His Eminence Cardinal Carlos Aguiar Retes, and the address from the secretary general of the General Secretariat of the Synod, His Eminence Cardinal Mario Grech:

Greeting of His Eminence Cardinal Carlos Aguiar Retes

I would like to begin this opening greeting by recalling a reflection which Pope Paul VI put forward in his first encyclical “*Ecclesiam Suam*” in the context of the Second Vatican Council, and which I believe is still valid in relation to the current challenges we face in achieving the New Evangelization, indicated by Pope Saint John Paul II as indispensable to transmit the Faith with hope, joy and effectiveness to the new generations, and especially to all those who suffer the unfortunate consequences of the inequality and social polarization so widespread in many of our countries.

Pope Saint Paul VI stated: “*These two policies of Ours-which are yours, of course, as well-lead naturally to a third policy, which has to do with the relations which the Church must establish with the surrounding world in which it lives and works. ... It is at this point, therefore, that the problem of the Church’s dialogue with the modern world arises. It will be for the Council to determine the extent and complexity of this problem and to do what it can to devise suitable methods for its solution (Ecclesiam Suam, 12, 14).*”

On behalf of those present here and of all the bishops, priests, religious, consecrated men and women, and the faithful in general, who are participating in the synodal process, and which today begins its culmination with the present 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, I express our gratitude to the Holy Father

Francis for his providential convocation; for we have perceived in this process the growing awakening of the Church to establish synodality as the proper way of life to strengthen the fraternal bonds of the great family of God, on pilgrimage towards the House of the Father, as a priority basis for responding satisfactorily to the present challenges of our time.

In particular, I have appreciated through the greater participation of the ecclesial sectors the importance of listening to the varied and very positive perceptions of the faithful, about the evangelizing mission; as well as its needs, and also its very encouraging fruits, which undoubtedly strengthen us, especially the bishops, priests, and pastoral workers to continue with greater enthusiasm and more accurately our responsibilities, and to combine the efforts in the synodal process, making real what You, Holy Father affirmed in paragraph 5 of *Episcopalis Communio*: “*The Bishop is both teacher and disciple. He is a teacher when, endowed with the special assistance of the Holy Spirit, he proclaims to the faithful the word of truth in the name of Christ, head and shepherd. But he is a disciple when, knowing that the Spirit has been bestowed upon every baptized person, he listens to the voice of Christ speaking through the entire People of God, making it ‘infallible in credendo’.*”

Therefore, with a great conviction as pastors, we must continue our efforts with the greatest possible determination and hope, because the inertia of the traditional pyramidal model of exercising ecclesial authority at its different levels continues to remain in a good part of the priests, faithful and even in some of our brother bishops.

We will walk in this confidence throughout these weeks, listening to the Word of God and the word of our brothers, and sharing what the Holy Spirit is sowing within us.

Now that we have seen the benefit of the journey towards a Missionary Synodal Church, and with God's blessing, let us place our firm hope in the assistance of the Holy Spirit. Always remembering that in this earthly life there is no fullness, the achievements are only an encouragement not to falter on the way and to persevere to the end.

In this regard, it seems appropriate to recall the beginning of the Encyclical *Spe Salvi* in which Pope Benedict XVI states: “*According to the Christian faith, ‘redemption’—salvation—is not simply a given. Redemption is offered to us in the sense that we have been given hope, trustworthy hope, by virtue of which we can face our present: the present, even if it is arduous, can be lived and accepted if it leads towards a goal, if we can be sure of this goal, and if this goal is great enough to justify the effort of the journey.*”

Indeed, I trust that all of us present, having lived through the synodal process since 2021, although we have noted the real difficulty of renewing our particular Churches, have perceived how, our faithful and pastoral workers in particular have become enthusiastic, full of hope, in achieving a fraternal, supportive, subsidiary Church, which shines a light in the difficult circumstances of our contemporary era.

In this way, we will make tangible what is expressed in paragraph 6 of *Episcopalis Communio*: “*The Synod of Bishops must increasingly become a privileged instrument for listening to the People of God: ‘For the Synod Fathers we ask the Holy Spirit first of all for the gift of listening: to listen to God, that with him we may hear the cry of the people; to listen to the people until breathing in the desire to which God calls us.’*”

It is therefore very timely, in this Assembly that we begin today, to recover our awareness of the promise of Jesus, who said: “*For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.*”

Let us then allow ourselves to be led by the Holy Spirit, and let us experience how good the Lord is to those who trust in Him!

May God the Trinity and the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church, accompany us in this way!

Address of His Eminence Cardinal Mario Grech

Welcome back! To all, sisters and brothers in Christ, our greetings.

Convoked for the second session of the Assembly, we invoke the Spirit to enlighten us and make our ears attentive to his Voice. The Spirit who, from the depths of the violated creation and the creatures who suffer injustice upon injustice, groans and suffers in childbirth will initiate a new season.

As we celebrate this Assembly, wars are being fought in many parts of the world! We are on the verge of a widening of the conflict. How many generations will have to pass before the warring peoples can once again "sit together" and talk to each other, to build a peaceful future together?

We embrace the sisters and brothers present in the room who come from war zones or nations where the fundamental freedoms of peoples are violated. Through their voices we can hear the cries and tears of those who suffer under bombs, especially children, who breathe this climate of hatred. As believers we are called to desire and pray for the precious gift of peace for all peoples.

We must always combine continuous prayer with credible witness. This Assembly is in itself a credible testimony! The fact that men and women have come from all parts of the earth to listen to the Spirit by listening to one another is a sign of contradiction for the world. I am reminded of the final passage of the Holy Father's speech on the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops: 'A synodal Church is like a standard lifted up among the nations (cf. /s11:12) in a world which — while calling for participation, solidarity and transparency in public administration — often consigns the fate of entire peoples to the grasp of small but powerful groups'.

The Synod is essentially a school of discernment: it is the Church gathered together with Peter to discern together. A synodal Church is a proposal to today's society: discernment is the fruit of a mature exercise of synodality as a style and method. Ecclesial discernment can be a challenge and an example for any kind of assembly, which must find in listening to each other's members the golden rule for the search for truth and the common good. Without forgetting that discernment is a 'bridge' through which believers and non-believers can listen and understand each other using a common grammar. This is not said by me, but by a lay author, Umberto Eco. The horizon of this Assembly of ours is the Church, but the desire is that the result of our work on relationships, on processes, on places may be of help to all people and contribute to the building of a more just world.

Many think that the purpose of the Synod is structural change in the Church, is reform. This is an anxiety, a desire that runs through the whole Church. We all desire it, yet we do not all have the same idea of reform and its priorities. As early as 1950, Yves Congar spoke of 'true or false reform in the Church'. For it to be true, our priorities must also be true, that is, they must be subject to the 'Spirit of truth, who guides the Church into all truth' (Jn 16:13). If the Holy Spirit did not have primacy in our work, the purpose of the Synod would be administrative juridical or political, not ecclesial!

It is the Spirit who leads the Church to know the truth. The council reminded us that "God, who spoke of old, uninterruptedly converses with the bride of His beloved Son; and the Holy Spirit, through whom the living voice of the Gospel resounds in the Church, and through her, in the world, leads unto all truth those who believe and makes the word of Christ dwell abundantly in them" (DV 8c). The constitution *Dei Verbum*, in order to explain how this can happen, recalls that "there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (cf. Lk, 2:19, 51) through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through Episcopal succession the sure gift of truth" (DV8b).

These are the subjects that make possible the dynamism of Tradition, which 'progresses in the Church *sub assistentia Spiritus Sancti*' (DV 8b). These subjects are none other than the Church itself, the People of God

gathered by its Pastors, which, "remain always steadfast in the teaching of the Apostles, in the common life, in the breaking of the bread and in prayers (Acts 2:42), so that holding to, practicing and professing the heritage of the faith, it becomes on the part of the bishops and faithful a *single common effort*" (DV10). The consensus of the Churches was for the early Church a sure criterion of the truth of Christ in the face of any truth claims made by heretics: what the Church believes is true, because the totality of the baptised cannot err in believing, by virtue of the gift of the Spirit.

From the very beginning of this synodal process, we have reaffirmed that it finds in this truth the ecclesial discernment, the listening to one another to hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church. It is a listening that has underpinned all the stages of the process: the consultation of the holy People of God in the local Churches, the discernment of the Pastors in the Bishops' Conferences, the further discernment in the continental Assemblies, the double session of the Assembly around the Holy Father, the principle and foundation of unity of the whole Church. Thus listed, the stages seem to configure a linear process, where the People of God appear only at the beginning to give the illusion of taking part in a decision-making process that however remains concentrated in the hands of a few. If this were the case, those who claim that the synodal process, once it has passed to the stage of the discernment of the bishops, has extinguished every prophetic instance of the People of God would be right!

But the 'universal consensus' resulting from discernment comes from listening to everyone. It is worth reiterating what the Holy Father said on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod: 'a synodal Church is a Church of listening', in which everyone - the holy People of God, the Episcopal College, the Bishop of Rome - is called to listen to one another, to hear what the Spirit is saying to the Churches. To ensure that this listening is everyone's and always involves everyone - that is, the Church - we implemented the principle of restitution. Always, at each step that fixed the ongoing ecclesial discernment in a text, we returned the fruit of the listening to the Churches.

This is not an act of courtesy. It is, on the contrary, an act of obligation, an application of the principle of circularity that must govern the life of the Church. Sending each document to the Bishop, "principle and foundation of unity in his Church", means returning the fruit of discernment to the subject from which the entire synodal process started - the People of God - so that the response of the Churches can give new impetus to ecclesial discernment. The ultimate meaning of this restitution is ecclesial: if the Church is "the body of the Churches", "in which and from which the one and only Catholic Church exists" (LG 23), the Synod is a process that engages the whole Church and everyone in the Church, each according to his or her function, charism and ministry.

It commits the General Secretariat of the Synod, which " collaborates with the Roman Pontiff, in accordance with the methods established or to be established by him, in matters of major importance for the good of the whole Church " (PE 33). Through a continuous circularity it will be possible to mature a synodal style and form of Church, in which the principle of the exchange of gifts is valid: may it soon happen that each Church "offers its own gifts to the other Churches and to the whole Church, so that the *Ecclesia tota* and each Church may benefit from the mutual communication of all, and from striving together towards salvation" (LG 13).

It involves every bishop in his Church. A synodal Church largely depends on a synodal Bishop. His first and fundamental task is to be the teacher and guarantor of ecclesial discernment. This task applies first and foremost in his Church, where he performs his ministry of leadership. But it is no less valid when he exercises it together with the other bishops in the bodies that manifest the groupings of Churches. Thus, the bishop who initiated the consultation in his Church and activated the participation bodies as subjects of ecclesial discernment, continues this discernment in the Bishops' Conference and in the Continental Assemblies, which the synod process has handed over to us as a significant 'place' of listening to the Churches of a continent. We will have to continue to reflect on this aspect on the theological, canonical and pastoral level.

The Petrine ministry, which emerges more and more as the service to the unity of the Church and in the Church, greatly benefits from this ordered process: of the *communio Ecclesiarum, Fidelium, Episcoporum* he is "the perpetual and visible principle and foundation of unity", who has called the whole Church to synodal action and

for the sake of the Church he gathers and returns the fruits of discernment, because of his ministry of solicitude for all the Churches. This applies to this 16th General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which has synodality as its theme. But it can become the style and way of proceeding in a synodal Church, which has also rediscovered, with the Spirit speaking to the Church, the power of ecclesial discernment as the fruit of listening to the Spirit through the mutual listening of all in the Church. The Petrine ministry is the axis of catholic synodality and the synodal process aims to help Peter in his discernment for the whole Church.

Intensive work awaits us. This phase will be followed by that of the reception and implementation of what has matured in the 2021-2024 synod process. The more the Churches receive the result, the more it will not be the result of our efforts, but the fruit of listening docilely to the Spirit. As St. Thomas writes: '*Actus credentis non terminatur ad enuntiabile, sed ad rem*' (S. Th., II/II, q. 1, art. 2, ad 2). A maxim that we can translate into an ecclesial dimension: the act of a Church that believes - this Assembly - does not end with a theoretical enunciation, a final Document, but with the concrete life of the Church, a Church that lives the Gospel, that walks together in the power of the Spirit towards the fulfilment of the Kingdom. Good work!
