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Address of the Holy Father Francis on the occasion of the Moment of Reflection for the Beginning of the Synodal Journey (New Synod Hall, 9 October 2021)

At 9.00 this morning, in the Vatican's New Synod Hall, in the presence of the Holy Father Francis, there began a Moment of Reflection for the beginning of the synodal Journey "For a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission".

It was attended by representatives of the People of God, including delegates from the International Meetings of Episcopal Conferences and similar bodies, members of the Roman Curia, fraternal delegates, delegates representing consecrated life and ecclesial lay movements, and the youth council.

The following is the Pope's address to those present at the Moment of Reflection:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

First of all, I would like to thank you for your presence here for the opening of the Synod. You have come by many different roads and from different Churches, each bearing your own questions and hopes. I am certain the Spirit will guide us and give us the grace to move forward together, to listen to one another and to embark on a discernment of the times in which we are living, in solidarity with the struggles and aspirations of all humanity. May we experience this Synod in the spirit of Jesus' fervent prayer to the Father on behalf of his disciples: "that they may all be one" (*Jn 17:21*). This is what we are called to: unity, communion, the fraternity born of the realization that all of us are embraced by the one love of God. All of us, without distinction, and in particular those of us who are bishops. As Saint Cyprian wrote: "We must maintain and firmly uphold this unity, above all ourselves, the bishops who preside in the Church, in order to demonstrate that the episcopate is itself one and undivided" (*De Ecclesiae Catholicae Unitate*, 5). In the one People of God, therefore, let us journey together, in order to experience a Church that receives and lives this gift of unity, and is open to the voice of the Spirit.

The Synod has three key words: *communion*, *participation* and *mission*. Communion and mission are theological terms describing the mystery of the Church, which we do well to keep in mind. The Second Vatican Council clearly taught that *communion* expresses the very nature of the Church, while pointing out that the Church has received “the *mission* of proclaiming and establishing among all peoples the kingdom of Christ and of God, and is, on earth, the seed and beginning of that kingdom” (*Lumen Gentium*, 5). With those two words, the Church contemplates and imitates the life of the Blessed Trinity, a mystery of communion *ad intra* and the source of mission *ad extra*. In the wake of the doctrinal, theological and pastoral reflections that were part of the reception of Vatican II, Saint Paul VI sought to distil in those two words – communion and mission – “the main lines enunciated by the Council”. Commemorating the opening of the Council, he stated that its main lines were in fact “communion, that is, cohesion and interior fullness, in grace, truth and collaboration... and mission, that is, apostolic commitment to the world of today” (*Angelus* of 11 October 1970).

In 1985, at the conclusion of the Synod marking the twentieth anniversary of the close of the Council, Saint John Paul II also reiterated that the Church’s nature is *koinonia*, which gives rise to her mission of serving as a sign of the human family’s intimate union with God. He went on to say: “It is most useful that the Church celebrate ordinary, and on occasion, also extraordinary synods”. These, if they are to be fruitful, must be well prepared: “it is necessary that the local Churches work at their preparation with the participation of all” (*Address at the Conclusion of the II Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, 7 December 1985). And this brings us to our third word: *participation*. The words “communion” and “mission” can risk remaining somewhat abstract, unless we cultivate an ecclesial praxis that expresses *the concreteness of synodality* at every step of our journey and activity, encouraging real involvement on the part of each and all. I would say that celebrating a Synod is always a good and important thing, but it proves truly beneficial if it becomes a living expression of “being Church”, of a way of acting marked by true participation.

This is not a matter of form, but of faith. Participation is a requirement of the faith received in baptism. As the Apostle Paul says, “in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (*1 Cor* 12:13). In the Church, everything starts with baptism. Baptism, the source of our life, gives rise to the equal dignity of the children of God, albeit in the diversity of ministries and charisms. Consequently, all the baptized are called to take part in the Church’s life and mission. Without real participation by the People of God, talk about communion risks remaining a devout wish. In this regard, we have taken some steps forward, but a certain difficulty remains and we must acknowledge the frustration and impatience felt by many pastoral workers, members of diocesan and parish consultative bodies and women, who frequently remain on the fringes. Enabling everyone to participate is an essential ecclesial duty!

The Synod, while offering a great opportunity for a pastoral conversion in terms of mission and ecumenism, is not exempt from *certain risks*. I will mention three of these. The first is *formalism*. The Synod could be reduced to an extraordinary event, but only externally; that would be like admiring the magnificent facade of a church without ever actually stepping inside. The Synod, on the other hand, is a process of authentic spiritual discernment that we undertake, not to project a good image of ourselves, but to cooperate more effectively with the work of God in history. If we want to speak of a synodal Church, we cannot remain satisfied with appearances alone; we need content, means and structures that can facilitate dialogue and interaction within the People of God, especially between priests and laity. This requires changing certain overly vertical, distorted and partial visions of the Church, the priestly ministry, the role of the laity, ecclesial responsibilities, roles of governance and so forth.

A second risk is *intellectualism*. The Synod could turn into a kind of study group, offering learned but abstract approaches to the problems of the Church and the evils in our world. The usual people saying the usual things, without great depth or spiritual insight, and ending up along familiar and unfruitful ideological and partisan divides, far removed from the reality of the holy People of God and the concrete life of communities around the world.

Finally, the temptation of *complacency*, the attitude that says: “We have always done it this way” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 33) and it is better not to change. Those who think this way, perhaps without even realizing it, make the mistake of not taking seriously the times in which we are living. The danger, in the end, is to apply old solutions to new problems. A patch of rough cloth that ends up creating a worse tear (cf. *Mt* 9:16). It is

important that the synodal process be exactly this: a process of becoming, a process that involves the local Churches, in different phases and from the bottom up, in an exciting and engaging effort that can forge a style of communion and participation directed to mission.

So let us experience this moment of encounter, listening and reflection as *a season of grace* that, in the joy of the Gospel, allows us to recognize at least *three opportunities*. First, that of moving *not occasionally but structurally* towards a *synodal Church*, an open square where all can feel at home and participate. The Synod then offers us the opportunity to become a *listening Church*, to break out of our routine and pause from our pastoral concerns in order to stop and listen. To listen to the Spirit in adoration and prayer, to listen to our brothers and sisters speak of their hopes and of the crises of faith present in different parts of the world, of the need for a renewed pastoral life and of the signals we are receiving from those on the ground. Finally, it offers us the opportunity to become a *Church of closeness*, that not only in words, but by her very presence weaves greater bonds of friendship with society and the world. A Church that does not stand aloof from life, but immerses herself in today's problems and needs, bandaging wounds and healing broken hearts with the balm of God.

Dear brothers and sisters, may this Synod be a true season of the Spirit! For we need the Spirit, the ever new breath of God, who sets us free from every form of self-absorption, revives what is moribund, loosens shackles and spreads joy. The Holy Spirit guides us where God wants us to be, not to where our own ideas and personal tastes would lead us. Father Congar once said: "There is no need to create *another Church*, but to create a *different Church*" (*True and False Reform in the Church*). For a "different Church", a Church open to the newness that God wants to suggest, let us with greater fervour and frequency invoke the Holy Spirit and humbly listen to him, journeying together as he, the source of communion and mission, desires: with docility and courage.

Come, Holy Spirit! You inspire new tongues and place words of life on our lips: keep us from becoming a "museum Church", beautiful but mute, with much past and little future. Come among us, so that in this synodal experience we will not lose our enthusiasm, dilute the power of prophecy, or descend into useless and unproductive discussions. Come, Spirit of love, open our hearts to hear your voice! Come, Spirit of holiness, renew the holy People of God! Come, Creator Spirit, renew the face of the earth!
