



The Holy See

SECOND SESSION OF THE
XVI GENERAL ORDINARY ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS (2-27 OCTOBER 2024)
1st GENERAL CONGREGATION

OPENING ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER FRANCIS

*Audience Hall
Wednesday, 2 October 2024*

[Multimedia]

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Since the Church of God was “convened in Synod” in October 2021, we have all travelled along part of the long journey to which God the Father has always called his people. He invites them to bring to all nations the good news that Jesus Christ is our peace (*Eph 2,14*) and confirms them with the Holy Spirit in their mission.

This Assembly, guided by the Holy Spirit, who “bends the stubborn heart and will, melts the frozen, warms the chill, guides the steps that go astray” (*Pentecost Sequence*), will need Him to make His contribution, for there to be a Synodal, missionary Church, which can move outwards and settle in the geographical and existential outskirts, making every effort to establish links with everyone there, in Christ our Brother and Lord.

There is a text by a 4th century spiritual, which sums up what happens when the Holy Spirit gets to work at Baptism, which grants equal dignity to all author (cf. Macarius of Alexandria, *Hom 18, 7-11*: PG 34, 639-642). The experiences Macarius describes help us to recognise how much has happened in the past three years, and how much is yet to happen.

This spiritual author’s reflection helps us to understand that the Holy Spirit is a trusty guide, and

our first task is to learn to distinguish his voice, because He speaks in everyone and in all things. The synodal experience has allowed us to 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 – we confront things that are not going well, injustices that seem to prevail, resistances to respond to evil with good, difficulties of forgiving; lack of courage in seeking peace. In these moments it seems that there is nothing more to do and we are gripped by despair. Just as hope is the humblest yet the strongest virtue, despair is the worst.

The Holy Spirit dries our tears and consoles us because He imparts God's hope. God is tireless, because His love is tireless.

The Holy Spirit penetrates into that part of us which is often just like a court of law, where we put the accused in the witness-box and make our judgments, usually finding them guilty. Macarius himself, in his homily, tells us that the Holy Spirit kindles, in those who receive him, a fire, a "fire of such joy and love that, were it possible, all without discrimination, bad and good alike, would take into their own hearts". This is because God accepts everyone, always; let us not forget: everyone, everyone, everyone, and always; and he offers them all new possibilities in life, right up to the last moment. That is why we must forgive everyone, always, aware that the willingness to forgive comes from the experience of having been forgiven. Only one is unable to forgive: the one who has not been forgiven.

Yesterday, during the penitential vigil, we had that experience. We asked pardon, and we recognised that we are sinners. We put pride on one side and cut ourselves off from presuming that we are better than others. Did we become any humbler?

Humility, too, is the Holy Spirit's gift: we should ask for it. As the etymology of the word tells us, humility brings us back down to earth, to the *humus*, and it reminds us of our origin, when, without the Creator's breath, we would still have been lifeless mud. Humility lets us look at the world and admit we are no better than anyone else. As Saint Paul says: "do not be wise in your own estimation" (*Rom 12,16*). And one cannot be humble without love. Christians should be like those women Dante Alighieri described in a sonnet, women with sorrow in their hearts for the loss of their friend Beatrice's father: "You who bear a humble look, with eyes cast down, displaying sadness" (*Vita Nuova XXII, 9*). This is the humility of solidarity and compassion, the humility of those who feel like a brother or sister to everyone else; they suffer their pain and recognise, in their wounds and sufferings, the wounds and sufferings of our Lord.

I encourage you to meditate in prayer on this fine spiritual text and to recognise that the Church - *semper reformanda* - cannot continue on her journey and be renewed without the Holy Spirit and His surprises; without allowing herself to be formed, by the hands of God the Creator, by the Son,

Jesus Christ, and by the Holy Spirit, as Saint Irenæus of Lyons teaches us (cf. *Adv. Hær.* IV, 20, 1).

Ever since God, in the beginning, created man and woman from the earth; ever since God called Abraham to be a blessing for all the peoples of the earth and called Moses to lead across the desert a people freed from slavery; ever since the Virgin Mary welcomed the Word which made her the Mother of God's Son according to the flesh and the Mother of all the men and women who would become her Son's disciples; ever since the crucified and risen Lord Jesus poured out his Holy Spirit at Pentecost: ever since then, we have been travelling, as those who have been "shown mercy", towards the total, definitive fulfilment of the Father's love. And let us not forget that: we have been "shown mercy".

We know how beautiful and tiring that journey has been. We are making it together as a people who, even in our own day, are a sign and an instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race (cf. [LG](#) 1). We are making it with and for every man and woman of good will, in each of whom grace is invisibly working (cf. [GS](#) 22). We are making it, convinced of the "relational" nature of the Church and taking care that the relationships given to us and entrusted to our responsibility and creativity will always be a sign that mercy is freely available. A so-called Christian who does not enter into God's gratuitousness and mercy is simply an atheist disguised as a Christian. God's mercy makes us trustworthy and responsible.

Sisters, brothers, let us make this journey, mindful that we have been called to reflect the light of our sun, who is Christ, like a pale moon which faithfully and joyously takes on the mission of being for the world a sacrament of that light, a light that does not shine out of us.

The XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which has now reached its Second Session, represents this common journey of the People of God in a novel way.

The inspiration which came to [Pope Saint Paul VI](#), when [he instituted the Synod of Bishops in 1965](#), has proved quite fruitful. In the intervening sixty years, we have learnt to recognise the Synod of Bishops as a plural and symphonic subject which is capable of sustaining the Catholic Church's journey and mission, an effective help for the Bishop of Rome in his service to the communion of all the Churches and of the whole Church.

[Saint Paul VI](#) was quite aware that "this Synod, [...] like all human institutions, can be improved upon with the passing of time" ([Apostolica Sollicitudo](#)). The Apostolic Constitution [Episcopalis Communio](#) was meant to build on the experience of the various synodal Assemblies (Ordinary, Extraordinary and Special) and to present the synodal Assembly explicitly as a process and not only as an event.

The synodal process is also a learning process, in the course which the Church gets to know

herself better and to identify the most suitable forms of pastoral action for the mission her Lord entrusts to her. The learning process also involves the ways pastors, and particularly Bishops, exercise their ministry.

When I decided to convene also - as full members of this XVI Assembly - a significant number of Lay and Consecrated people (men and women), Deacons and Priests, developing what somehow had already been envisaged for earlier Assemblies, I did so in accordance with the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council's understanding of the ministry of bishops: the Bishop, the principle and visible basis of unity of each particular Church, cannot live out his service except within the People of God, with the People of God, leading, standing among, and following the portion of the People of God that has been entrusted to him. The manifestation and identification of this inclusive understanding of episcopal ministry needs to avoid two dangers: first, an abstract approach which ignores the fertile concreteness of places and relationships and the value of each individual; second, pitting hierarchy and faithful against each other in a way that fractures communion. It is certainly not a question of replacing one with the other, urged on by cries like: "now it's our turn"! No, this is not right: "now it's up to us laypeople", "now it's up to us priests". No. This is not right. On the contrary, what we are asked to do is to operate together in a symphonic style, in a composition that unites us all at the service of God's mercy, according to the different ministries and charisms that the Bishop has the task of recognising and promoting.

Journeying together with everyone - everyone, everyone together, is a process in which the Church, submitting to the action of the Holy Spirit, and sensitive enough to capture the signs of the times (cf. GS 4), continually renews herself and perfects her sacramental nature, in order to be a credible witness of the mission to which she is called, to unite all peoples into the one people awaited at the end, when God Himself will ask us to be seated at the banquet prepared by Him (cf. *Is* 25,6-10).

The composition of this XVI Assembly is thus more than a contingent fact. It expresses a way of exercising episcopal ministry which is consistent with the living Tradition of the Churches and with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council: never should a Bishop, or any other Christian, think of himself "without others". Just as nobody is saved alone, the proclamation of salvation requires everyone, and demands that everyone be heard.

The presence at the Assembly of the Synod of Bishops of non-episcopal members does not diminish the "episcopal" character of the Assembly. Still less does it place some limit on or derogate from the authority of individual Bishops or of the episcopal College (I say this because of some sort of rumpus caused by gossips running around all over the place). Rather, it indicates the form the exercise of episcopal authority is called to have in a Church which is aware of being constitutively relational and thus synodal. The relationship with Christ and with others in Christ – those who are there and those who are not yet there, but are awaited by the Father – completes the substance and moulds the shape of the whole Church at all times.

Different “collegial” and “synodal” forms of exercising episcopal ministry (in particular Churches, in groupings of Churches, in the Church as a whole) will need to be identified in due course, always with respect for the deposit of faith and living Tradition, always in response to what the Holy Spirit is asking of the Churches at this particular time and in the various contexts in which they live. And let us not forget that the Spirit is harmony. Let us think of the morning of Pentecost: there was fearful disorder, but He brought harmony in that disorder. Let us not forget that He really is harmony. It is not a sophisticated, intellectual harmony; it is everything, an existential harmony.

It is the Holy Spirit who makes the Church perennially faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ’s command and attentive to his Word. The Spirit guides the disciples to the entire truth (Cf. *Jn* 16,13). He is guiding us, too, gathered in the Holy Spirit in this Assembly, to give an answer, after a journey of three years, to the question how to be a synodal Church in mission. I would add “merciful”.

With a heart full of hope and gratitude, aware of the demanding task which has been given to you (and which has been given to *us*), I hope all will open themselves willingly to the action of the Holy Spirit, our trusty guide, our consolation. Thank you.