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Press Conference to present the initiative *Together – Gathering of the People of God* and the Ecumenical Prayer Vigil presided over by Pope Francis (30 September 2023)

At 13.00 today, a press conference was livestreamed from the Holy See Press Office, *Sala San Pio X*, Via dell'Ospedale 1, to present the initiative *Together – Gathering of the People of God* and the Ecumenical Prayer Vigil to be presided over by Pope Francis in Saint Peter's Square on 30 September, on the eve of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the theme: "For a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission".

During the conference, some updates regarding the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, to take place from 4 to 29 October 2023, were also illustrated.

The speakers were: Dr. Paolo Ruffini, prefect of the Holy See Dicastery for Communication, president of the Commission for Information of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops; Sr. Nathalie Becquart, X.M.C.J., under-secretary of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops; and Fra' Matthew of the Taizé Community.

The following are the interventions by Dr. Ruffini and Sr. Becquart:

Intervention of Dr. Paolo Ruffini

Good morning,

I asked to be able to speak in this press conference, as president of the Commission for Information of the Synod, to provide some information, to clarify some matters, to facilitate your work, and to guarantee our commitment so that there might be an accurate representation of the Synod. To contribute to an atmosphere of serene collaboration among those who have the duty to preserve the Synod for what is, to enable it to bear fruit, and those who have the task of reporting on the Synod.

As you know, we do not yet have the definitive calendar, and the regulations are also in the process of being drawn up.

As soon as we have them, we will be sure to arrange another meeting to update you.

In the meantime, we have some information that we think will be useful to you for a shared understanding of the synodal process.

It is therefore important to inform you in advance of some methodological notes.

Every Member will be given a copy of all the documents published since the beginning: the preparatory document, the working document for the continental assembly, the reports of the continental assembly and the *Instrumentum laboris*.

We have just heard how the Ecumenical Vigil will take place this coming 30 September.

Immediately after the celebration, all the participants in the Synod will return to the atrium of the Paul VI Hall, where there will be a charity dinner offered by the Italian Episcopal Conference.

Spiritual retreat (30 September – 3 October)

Immediately after the dinner, the members, fraternal delegates and special guests will transfer by coach to Sacrofano, where the spiritual retreat will be held from 30 September to 3 October.

In the mornings, there will be meditations from both spiritual assistants:

- - The Reverend Fr. Timothy Peter Joseph RADCLIFFE, O.P., of Oxford Monastery, Great Britain;
- - The Reverend Mother Maria Ignazia ANGELINI, O.S.B., of Viboldone Monastery, Italy.

In the afternoon, the participants will be divided into groups and before the evening, every day, the Eucharist will be celebrated.

With respect to its nature of prayer, we will be sure to ensure you may be informed also on these days of the retreat.

Programme of 4 October 2023

The day of 4 October will begin with the opening Holy Mass of the Synod, which will coincide with the first celebration with the new Cardinals.

The plenary work for the First General Congregation (with the interventions of the Secretary General, the General Rapporteur and the Holy Father) will begin the same afternoon.

Both the Mass and the work of the First General Congregation will be broadcast.

Working method in the following days up to the conclusion.

I begin with a premise.

The consultation and listening phase, which began at the local level in October 2021 and continued up to the Continental Assemblies, allowed the People of God from all over the world to express their “lived” understanding of what a synodal Church is; and to formulate some priority issues to be submitted to the discernment of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, in the two Sessions or periods in which it is divided.

As envisaged in the Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis communio* (art. 18), the fruit of this discernment will be collected in the final document that will be drafted next year, at the end of the two Sessions, and offered to the Holy Father.

The *Instrumentum laboris* (IL) prepared for the First Session brings together and briefly presents the fruit of the consultation and listening phase and the priority issues for discernment.

The task of the First Session is to begin this discernment, which will conclude in the Second.

Obviously, while we already know the path that has brought us this far and we also already know the convictions of many members of the Synod, we do not know - it is not possible to know already - what will be the synthesis that this year's assembly will arrive at and what will be the conclusions that the Synodal Assembly will entrust to the Holy Father next year.

The Synod will be a journey of prayer, of mutual listening, of discernment, of communion.

The official languages of the Assembly are Italian, English, French, Spanish and Portuguese. A simultaneous translation service will be provided in the General Congregations.

The work of the Synodal Assembly will be divided into five Modules.

The first Module will be devoted to the subject matter proposed in Section A of the IL.

The next three Modules will respectively deal with the subject proposed in Sections B 1 - B 2 - B 3 of the IL, using the relevant Worksheets.

The Concluding Module will instead be devoted to the discussion and approval of the Summary Report of the First Session of the IL.

So, one module on synodality, one on communion, one on mission, one on participation. The Concluding Module will be dedicated to the approval of the Synthesis Report of this First Session of the Assembly.

Each module will include plenary sessions (called General Congregations) and working groups (called *Circuli minores*).

Each General Congregation will open with a moment of prayer, which will also be streamed to facilitate the communion of prayer, from all over the world, of all the people of God.

In the *Circuli minores* there will be no simultaneous translation, as each group will normally use only one language.

To make this possible, the General Secretariat, in the composition of the *Circuli minores*, will take into account

the language preferences of the participants, who have been able to choose between Italian, English, French, Spanish and Portuguese.

The *Circuli minores* will be formed not only on a linguistic basis, but also on a thematic basis.

Each Module will begin with a Mass at Saint Peter's. It will be followed by a General Congregation with a presentation of the theme by the General Rapporteur and some further introductory talks. These will include those of the two spiritual assistants: Father Radcliffe and Sister Angelini.

Both the Mass and the first Congregation will be streamed.

More specifically, in each Module, the work will be divided between General Congregations and *Circuli minores*.

This will make it possible to alternate moments of in-depth study in smaller groups with the universal overview proper to the Plenary Assembly.

The same subject matter will therefore be addressed in different ways, interwoven for greater fruitfulness, in an atmosphere of prayer, listening and communion.

In particular, the first four Modules (A, B 1, B 2, B 3) will have the following structure:

- a General Congregation for the presentation of the topic by the Rapporteur General

a General Congregation for the presentation of the topic by the General Rapporteur and further introductory interventions;

- two meetings of the *Circuli minores*, dedicated to an in-depth study of the assigned topic;

- three General Congregations (two for Module A) to hear the contributions of the *Circuli minores* and for open discussion on the topic.

Three General Congregations (two for Module A) to listen to the contributions of the *Circuli minores* and for open discussion on the theme from them;

- a meeting of the *Circuli minores* to draw up the Group Report, which once approved will be submitted to the General Secretariat.

The work of the Concluding Module will be organized starting with the presentation of a draft of the Synthesis Report, which will be discussed at the General Congregation and on which the *Circuli minores* will formulate their observations (or methods).

The text of the synthesis will then be submitted to the Plenary Assembly for approval.

The *Circuli minores* will be composed of 10/12 people each, and will be formed by the General Secretariat on the basis of the linguistic and thematic preferences indicated by each participant.

Their composition will vary with each module, allowing each to interact with a larger number of participants, and will be communicated in advance to allow for more thorough preparation.

The *Circuli minores* will proceed to a joint discernment of the issues addressed with the active participation of each member.

The results of the discernment of each of the *Circuli minores* will be expressed in a written Report that will collect points of convergence and divergence, tensions that have emerged and questions that remain open, and above all insights and proposals for concrete steps to be taken in relation to the issues addressed; it will also include a brief evaluation of the dynamic and climate in which the work was carried out.

In each Module, the work of the *Circuli minores* will be structured according to the method of Conversation in the Spirit (cf. nos. 32-42 of the IL).

In order to facilitate a more fruitful application, each working group will include an Expert with skills in facilitating conversation processes in the Spirit, who will accompany the exchange from a methodological point of view.

Each Participant is invited to devote time, reflection and prayer to the preparation of his or her own opening speech in the *Circuli minores*.

In each Module, the groups will meet for the first time to address the assigned theme according to the following three steps:

- in a first round, each member of the group will take the floor, making his or her own contribution with a speech lasting no more than four minutes;
- in a second round, each member of the group will express “what from their listening has touched them most deeply and what they feel challenged by most strongly” (IL, no. 38), opening themselves to a common listening to the voice of the Spirit;
- a third time will be devoted to gathering the fruits, drawing up a first draft of the Report and selecting from it the most significant points and above all the questions and proposals that the group considers important to submit to the Assembly in the speech that one of the members will make in the following General Congregation;
- listening to the contributions of the other groups and the free discussion in plenary will allow the perspective of one’s own group to be articulated with all the others in an atmosphere of prayer;
- then, at the third meeting, the draft Report will be reread and amended in the light of the plenary exchange, so as to provide a complete representation of the work done: it will thus record the points and proposals on which there is substantial agreement, but also those of disagreement, indicating the different positions and their reasons;
- the members of the group will be asked to express their consensus on the adequacy of the report to represent the work carried out in common and not on the fact that they all agree on each individual point;
- after approval, the Report will be handed over to the General Secretariat.

Communication

I will conclude by returning to the theme of the communication of all the above.

The way we communicate the Synod is very important for the discernment process and for the whole Church.

This is why the Pope has invited us all to understand and report what the Synod is and what it is not.

From this, a few rules can also be derived regarding communication, based not in and of themselves, but in the essence of the Synod.

The preservation of confidentiality, privacy, I would say the sacredness of certain spaces for conversation in the Spirit, is consubstantial to the desire to make these moments a true opportunity for listening, discernment and prayer based on communion.

Every public or private organization, moreover, preserves these precious, indispensable moments of free, protected confrontation, where common thinking is in the making.

The methodology we have described will enable Synod members to get to know and listen to one another as part of one body.

The Assembly, after three weeks of prayer, reflection and conversion, will approve a synthesis document, which will of course be made public, but it will not be the final document.

Let us not forget that this is the First Session and that the Second Session will be held next year.

Let me conclude by summarizing.

In such a divided world, we really count a lot on the way communication will be able to narrate this effort of ours for communion.

Count on us. We will do everything we can to help you.

In the meantime, although we do not yet have the rules and the calendar, we can already say (as you have already heard) that the following will be streamed:

- the opening Mass;
- the first General Congregation
- the Opening Sessions of each Module.

Enjoy your work, and thank you for the work you do.

Intervention of Sr. Nathalie Becquart, X.M.C.J.

The challenge of this Synod is to learn to walk more closely together, listening to the Spirit, in order to become a more synodal Church, with the aim of proclaiming the Gospel in today's world. The importance of the ecumenical dimension was emphasized from the very beginning of the Synod. The Preparatory Document proposed dialogue with other Christian denominations as one of the ten themes to be explored during the local consultation phase (see Theme 7). Then, Cardinal Grech and Cardinal Koch stressed in a joint letter that "dialogue between Christians of different confessions, united by a single baptism, occupies a special place in the synodal journey" because synodality, like ecumenism, is a process of walking together. As Pope Francis has also said on several occasions, there can be no synodality without ecumenism and there is no ecumenism without synodality.

This perspective led to the decision to organize an ecumenical prayer vigil on Saturday 30 September from 17.00 to 19.00 in Saint Peter's Square. This time of prayer stems from a dream expressed by Brother Alois, prior of Taizé, at the opening of the Synod on 9 October 2021. The idea put forward by the Taizé Community was discussed with those responsible for the General Secretariat of the Synod and with those of the Dicastery for Christian Unity, who proposed organizing it on the eve of the opening of the Synod. The project was then

proposed to Pope Francis, who decided to schedule it and preside at the Synod vigil.

The vigil will be attended by many leaders of the different Churches and Christian communions, as well as members of the Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, who will thus begin their Roman stage before leaving that same evening to the *Fraterna Domus* in Sacrofano for a three-day spiritual retreat before the opening Mass of the Synod on the morning of 4 October. Open to all the People of God, this ecumenical prayer vigil will highlight two fundamental aspects of the People of God: the centrality of prayer and the importance of dialogue with others to advance together on the paths of brotherhood in Christ and unity.

The Ecumenical Prayer Vigil was therefore prepared:

- to emphasize the centrality of prayer in the synodal process, which is a spiritual process;
- to underline the articulation between the synodal path and the ecumenical path that all the documents of the synodal path have highlighted. Synodality and ecumenism are two paths to follow together. The commitment to build a synodal Church has several ecumenical implications. (cf *Instrumentum Laboris* B1);
- To underline the key theme of commitment to unity and peace in this world torn apart by so many divisions;
- To give a strong sign of the importance of prayer for the unity of the baptized in Christ and to entrust the work of the Synod together to the Holy Spirit.

Representatives of the different Christian traditions will participate in this ecumenical prayer vigil:

- from the Orthodox Churches, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople, Patriarch Theophilos III of Jerusalem, and a representative of Patriarch Theodore II of Alexandria);
- from the Eastern Orthodox Churches, the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch Ignatius Aphrem II, Mar Paulus Benjamin representing the Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, and Archbishop Abune Ermias, representing the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Tewahedo Orthodox Church;
- from the historic Protestant communions: the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, the Reverend Anne Burghardt, General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, the Vetero-Catholic Archbishop Bernd Wallet;
- of the Evangelical-Pentecostal Communions: the Reverend Thomas Schirmmacher, General Secretary of the Evangelical Alliance Mondial), the Reverend William Wilson, President of the World Pentecostal Fraternity, and the Reverend Kuzipa Nalwamba, representing the World Council of Churches.

In a special way, twelve Church and Christian leaders have been invited to lead the prayer together with Pope Francis. Some fraternal delegates sent by their Churches to the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops will also speak.

The programme is planned in two parts, after a welcome time on the square with different choirs then a procession a pre-Vigil time from 17:00 to 18:00 with four interventions of thanksgiving, interspersed with songs, on the gifts that God gives us and the responsibility that follows. After each talk, testimonies will be presented.

Then, from 18:00 to 19:10, the Ecumenical Prayer Vigil with Pope Francis will take place, including an introduction by Pope Francis, an opening prayer by Patriarch Bartholomew, the reading of the Word of God, a time of silence, intercessions read by a Church leader/Christian leader, or fraternal delegate to the Synod. The Lord's Prayer, introduced by Archbishop Welby, and the Words of Pope Francis will be followed by a concluding prayer and blessing together by Pope Francis and all twelve Church/Christian leaders, addressed to the Synod participants and all others.

In conclusion, I would like to recall how young people have a particularly important role to play in the Synodal Church. WYD Lisbon gave us a glimpse of synodality in action, and listening to young people during this period emphasized this. It is to this style of welcoming and fraternal Church, where unity in diversity can be experienced, that many young people aspire.

To enable young people to participate in this important moment of prayer to entrust the work of the Synod to God, the Taizé Community and many others took the initiative to organize a weekend meeting in Rome. This meeting for young people aged 18 to 35, which also bears the name *Together* - because the *Together* prayer vigil is an integral part of it - will now be presented to you by Brother Matthew. I would like to conclude by thanking in particular Brother Alois, Brother Matthew and Brother Luc, the whole Taizé Community with its young volunteers and the many partners from all the Churches, not forgetting the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity and the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, which have been involved in this preparation for many months.

This prayer vigil and the *Together* gathering are the fruit of a marvellous collaboration in a very synodal style. In the words of Pope Francis, “we journey by walking”; this unique and prophetic event, open to the whole People of God in its diversity, can demonstrate how the mission of the Church is to be a communion that radiates outwards to show the world what is at stake in moving forward together, working for the unity of the human race.
