

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER FRANCIS

*New Synod Hall
Saturday, 9 October 2021*

[**Multimedia**]

Dear brothers and sisters ,

thank you for being here at the opening of the Synod. You have come from many paths and Churches, each carrying questions and hopes in their hearts, and I am sure that the Spirit will guide us and give us the grace to go forward together, to listen to each other and to initiate discernment in our time, becoming in solidarity with the toils and desires of humanity. I reiterate that the Synod is not a parliament, that the Synod is not an investigation of opinions; the Synod is an ecclesial moment, and the protagonist of the Synod is the Holy Spirit. If there is no Spirit, there will be no Synod.

We live this Synod in the spirit of the prayer that Jesus addressed heartily to the Father for his followers: "That they may all be one" (*Jn 17:21*). We are called to this: to unity, to communion, to the fraternity that arises from feeling embraced by the one love of God. All, without distinction, and we Pastors in particular, as Saint Cyprian wrote: "We must maintain and firmly vindicate this unity, especially we Bishops who preside over the Church, to prove that even the episcopate itself is one and undivided" (*De Ecclesiae Catholicae Unitate* , 5). In the one People of God, therefore, we walk together, to experience a Church that receives and lives the gift of unity and opens itself to the voice of the Spirit.

The key words of the Synod are three: *communion* , *participation* , *mission* . Communion and mission are theological expressions that designate the mystery of the Church and of which it is good to remember. The Second Vatican Council clarified that *communion* expresses the very nature of the Church and, at the same time, affirmed that the Church has received "the *mission* of announcing and establishing in all peoples the kingdom of Christ and of God, and of this kingdom constitutes the seed and the beginning on earth" (*Lumen gentium* , 5). Two words through which the Church contemplates and imitates the life of the Holy Trinity, a mystery of communion *ad intra* and source of mission *ad extra* . After a time of doctrinal, theological and pastoral reflections that characterized the reception of Vatican II, St. Paul VI wanted to condense precisely in these two words - communion and mission - "the main lines, enunciated by the Council". Commemorating its opening, he affirmed that the general lines had been "communion, that is, cohesion and interior fullness, in grace, in truth, in collaboration [...] and mission, that is, apostolic commitment to the contemporary world" (*Angelus* , 11 October 1970), which is not proselytism.

Closing the Synod of 1985, twenty years after the conclusion of the conciliar assembly, St. John Paul II also wanted to reaffirm that the nature of the Church is *koinonia* : from it springs the mission of being a sign of the intimate union of the human family with God. And he added: "It is highly appropriate that ordinary and, if necessary, extraordinary Synods be celebrated in the Church" which, in order to bear fruit, must be well prepared: "that is, it is necessary that in the local Churches work on their preparation with the participation of all" (*Speech at the conclusion of the II Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops* , 7 December 1985). Here is the third word, *participation*. Communion and mission risk remaining somewhat abstract terms if an ecclesial praxis is not cultivated which expresses *the concreteness of synodality* in every step of the journey and of work, promoting the real involvement of each and every one. I would like to say that celebrating a Synod is always beautiful and important, but it is truly fruitful if it becomes a living expression of being Church, of acting characterized by true participation.

And this is not out of style, but out of faith. Participation is a requirement of the baptismal faith. As the Apostle Paul states, "we have all been baptized by one Spirit into one body" (*1 Cor 12.13*). The starting point, in the ecclesial body, is this and no other: Baptism. From it, our source of life, derives the equal dignity of the children of God, even in the difference of ministries and charisms. For this, all are called to participate in the life of the Church and in her mission. If there is no real participation of the whole People of God, the discourses on communion risk remaining pious intentions. On this aspect we have made some steps forward, but it is still a certain effort and we are forced to record the hardship and suffering of many pastoral workers, of the participation bodies of the dioceses and parishes, of the women who are often still on the margins. . Everyone participate: it is an indispensable ecclesial commitment! All baptized, this is the identity card: Baptism.

The Synod, just as it offers us a great opportunity for a pastoral conversion in a missionary and also ecumenical key, is not exempt from *some risks* . I mention three. The first is that of *formalism*. A Synod can be reduced to an extraordinary event, but a facade, just as if one were looking at a beautiful facade of a church without ever setting foot inside it. Instead the Synod is a path of effective spiritual discernment, which we do not undertake to give a

beautiful image of ourselves, but to better collaborate in the work of God in history. Therefore, if we speak of a synodal Church we cannot be satisfied with the form, but we also need substance, tools and structures that favor dialogue and interaction in the People of God, especially between priests and laity. Why am I stressing this? Because sometimes there is some elitism in the presbyteral order that makes it detach from the laity; and the priest eventually becomes the "owner of the shack" and not the pastor of a whole Church that is moving forward.

A second risk is that of *intellectualism* - abstraction, reality goes there and we go somewhere else with our reflections -: to make the Synod a kind of study group, with cultured but abstract interventions on the problems of Church and the evils of the world; a sort of "talking about him", where we proceed in a superficial and worldly way, ending up falling back into the usual sterile ideological and party classifications and detaching ourselves from the reality of the holy People of God, from the concrete life of the communities around the world.

Finally, there may be the temptation of *immobility*: since "it has always been done this way" (Apostolic *Exhortation Evangelii gaudium*, 33) - this word is a poison in the life of the Church, "it has always been done this way" - better not to change. Those who move within this horizon, even without realizing it, make the mistake of not taking the time we live in seriously. The risk is that it will eventually adopt old solutions to new problems: a new cloth patch, which eventually creates a worse tear (cf. *Mt*9.16). For this reason it is important that the Synod be truly such, an ongoing process; involve, in different phases and starting from the bottom, the local Churches, in a passionate and embodied work, which imprints a style of communion and participation marked by mission.

Let us therefore live this occasion of encounter, listening and reflection as *a time of grace*, brothers and sisters, a time of grace which, in the joy of the Gospel, allows us to seize at least *three opportunities*. The first is to set out *not occasionally but structurally* towards a *synodal Church*: an open place where everyone feels at home and can participate. The Synod then offers us the opportunity to become a *Church of listening*: to take a break from our rhythms, to stop our pastoral anxieties to stop and listen. Listen to the Spirit in worship and prayer. How we miss the prayer of adoration today! Many have lost not only the habit, but also the notion of what it means to adore. Listening to the brothers and sisters on the hopes and crises of faith in the different areas of the world, on the urgent need for renewal of pastoral life, on the signals that come from local realities. Finally, we have the opportunity to become a *Church of closeness*. We always return to God's style: God's style is closeness, compassion and tenderness. God has always worked like this. If we do not arrive at this Church of closeness with attitudes of compassion and tenderness, we will not be the Church of the Lord. And this not only in words, but with presence, so that greater bonds of friendship are established with society and the world: a Church that does not separate itself from life, but takes on the frailties and poverty of our time, caring for wounds and healing the broken hearts with the balm of God. Let us not forget the style of God who must help us: closeness, compassion and tenderness.

Dear brothers and sisters, may this Synod once inhabited by the Spirit! Because we need the Spirit, the ever-new breath of God, who frees us from all closure, revives what is dead, loosens the chains, spreads joy. The Holy Spirit is the One who guides us where God wills and not where our ideas and personal tastes would lead us. Father Congar, of holy memory, recalled: "We must not create *another Church*, we must create a *different Church*" (*True and false reform in the Church*, Milan 1994, 193). And this is the challenge. For a "different Church", open to the newness that God wants to suggest, let us invoke the Spirit with more strength and frequency and let us humbly listen to him, walking together, as he, creator of communion and mission, desires, that is, with docility and courage.

Come, Holy Spirit. You who stir up new languages and put words of life on our lips, keep us from becoming a museum church, beautiful but silent, with so much past and little future. Come among us, because in the synodal experience we do not allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by disenchantment, we do not water down the prophecy, we do not end up reducing everything to sterile discussions. Come, Holy Spirit of love, open our hearts to listening. Come, Spirit of holiness, renew the holy faithful People of God. Come, Spirit creator, make the face of the earth new. Amen.