

Pope Francis' Address at Commemorative Ceremony for the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops

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Your Beatitudes, Eminences, Excellencies, Brothers and Sisters,

As the XIV Ordinary General Assembly is underway, it is a joy for me to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops and to praise and honor the Lord for the Synod of Bishops. From the Second Vatican Council up to the current Synod on the Family, we have gradually learned of the necessity and beauty of “walking together.”

On this happy occasion I would like to extend a cordial greeting to His Eminence Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops along with the Undersecretary, His Excellency Archbishop Fabio Fabene, the Officials, the Consultors and other collaborators in the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops. Together with them, I greet and thank the Synod Fathers and other participants in this Synod gathered here this morning in this hall.

At this time we also want to remember those who, over the course of the last 50 years, have worked in the service of the Synod, starting from the successive General Secretaries: Cardinals Władysław Rubin, Jozef Tomko, Jan Pieter Schotte and Archbishop Nikola Eterovic. I take this opportunity to express my deepest, heartfelt gratitude to those – both living and deceased – who made such generous and competent contributions to the activities of the Synod of Bishops.

From the beginning of my ministry as Bishop of Rome I intended to enhance the Synod, which is one of the most precious legacies of the Second Vatican Council. For Blessed Paul VI, the Synod of Bishops was meant to keep alive the image of the Ecumenical Council and to reflect the conciliar spirit and method. The same Pontiff desired that the synodal organism "over time would be greatly improved." Twenty years later, St. John Paul II would echo those sentiments when he stated that "perhaps this tool can be further improved. Perhaps the collegial pastoral responsibility can find even find a fuller expression in the Synod." Finally, in 2006, Benedict XVI approved some changes to the *Ordo Synodi Episcoporum*, especially in light of the provisions of the Code of Canon Law and the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches, promulgated in meantime.

We must continue on this path. The world in which we live and that we are called to love and serve even with its contradictions, demands from the Church the strengthening of synergies in all areas of her mission. And it is precisely on this way of synodality where we find the pathway that God expects from the Church of the third millennium.

In a certain sense, what the Lord asks of us is already contained in the word "synod." Walking together – Laity, Pastors, the Bishop of Rome – is an easy concept to put into words, but not so easy to put into practice. After reiterating that People of God is comprised of all the baptized who are called to "be a spiritual edifice and a holy priesthood," the Second Vatican Council proclaims that "the whole body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief and manifests this reality in the supernatural sense

of faith of the whole people, when 'from the bishops to the last of the lay faithful' show their total agreement in matters of faith and morals."

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* I stressed that "the people of God is holy because this anointing makes [the people] infallible "in matters of belief", adding that "each baptized person, no matter what their function is in the Church and whatever educational level of faith, is an active subject of evangelization and it would be inappropriate to think of a framework of evangelization carried out by qualified actors in which the rest of the faithful People were only recipients of their actions. The *sensus fidei* prevents rigid separation between "Ecclesia" (Church) and the Church teaching, and learning (*Ecclesia docens discens*), since even the Flock has an "instinct" to discern the new ways that the Lord is revealing to the Church.

It was this conviction that guided me when I desired that God's people would be consulted in the preparation of the two-phased synod on the family. Certainly, a consultation like this would never be able to hear the entire *sensus fidei* (sense of the faith). But how would we ever be able to speak about the family without engaging families, listening to their joys and their hopes, their sorrows and their anguish? Through the answers to the two questionnaires sent to the particular Churches, we had the opportunity to at least hear some of the people on those issues that closely affect them and about which they have much to say.

A synodal church is a listening church, knowing that listening "is more than feeling." It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. Faithful people, the College of Bishops, the Bishop of Rome: we are one in listening to others; and all are listening to the Holy Spirit, the "Spirit of truth" (Jn 14:17), to know what the Spirit "is saying to the Churches" (Rev 2:7).

The Synod of Bishops is the convergence point of this dynamic of listening conducted at all levels of church life. The synodal process starts by listening to the people, who "even participate in the prophetic office of Christ", according to a principle dear to the Church of the first millennium: "*Quod omnes tangit ab omnibus tractari debet*" [what concerns all needs to be debated by all]. The path of the Synod continues by listening to the pastors. Through the Synod Fathers, the bishops act as true stewards, interpreters and witnesses of the faith of the whole Church, who must be able to carefully distinguish from that which flows from frequently changing public opinion.

On the eve of the Synod of last year I stated: "First of all, let us ask the Holy Spirit for the gift of listening for the Synod Fathers, so that with the Spirit, we might be able to hear the cry of the people and listen to the people until we breathe the will to which God calls us."

Finally, the synodal process culminates in listening to the Bishop of Rome, who is called upon to pronounce as "pastor and teacher of all Christians," not based on his personal convictions but as a supreme witness of "*totius fides Ecclesiae*" (the whole faith of the Church), of the guarantor of obedience and the conformity of the Church to the will of God, to the Gospel of Christ and to the Tradition of the Church.

The fact that the Synod always act, *cum Petro et sub Petro* - therefore not only *cum Petro*, but also *sub Petro* – this is not a restriction of freedom, but a guarantee of unity. In fact the Pope, by the will of the Lord, is "the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops as much as of the multitude of the faithful." To this is connected the concept of "*ierarchica communio*" (hierarchical communion) used by Vatican II: the Bishops being united

with the Bishop of Rome by the bond of episcopal communion (cum Petro) and at the same time hierarchically subjected to him as head of the college (sub Petro).

As a constitutive dimension of the Church, synodality gives us the more appropriate interpretive framework to understand the hierarchical ministry. If we understand as St. John Chrysostom did, that “church and synod are synonymous,” since the Church means nothing other than the common journey of the Flock of God along the paths of history towards the encounter of Christ Lord, then we understand that within the Church, no one can be raised up higher than the others. On the contrary, in the Church, it is necessary that each person be “lowered ” in order to serve his or her brothers and sisters along the way.

Jesus founded the Church by placing at its head the Apostolic College, in which the apostle Peter is the "rock" (cfr. Mt 16:18), the one who will confirm his brothers in the faith (cfr. Lk 22: 32). But in this church, as in an inverted pyramid, the summit is located below the base. For those who exercise this authority are called "ministers" because, according to the original meaning of the word, they are the least of all. It is in serving the people of God that each Bishop becomes for that portion of the flock entrusted to him, vicarius Christi, (vicar of that Jesus who at the Last Supper stooped to wash the feet of the Apostles (cfr. Jn 13: 1-15). And in a similar manner, the Successor of Peter is none other than the servus servorum Dei (Servant of the servants of God).

Let us never forget this! For the disciples of Jesus, yesterday, today and always, the only authority is the authority of the service, the only power is the power of the cross, in the words of the Master: “You know that the rulers of the nations lord it over them, and their leaders oppress them. It shall not be so among you: but whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave" (Mt 20:25-27). “It shall not be so among you:” in this expression we touch the heart of the mystery of the Church and receive the necessary light to understand hierarchical service.

In a Synodal Church, the Synod of Bishops is only the most obvious manifestation of a dynamism of communion that inspires all ecclesial decisions. The first level of exercise of synodality is realized in the particular (local) Churches. After having recalled the noble institution of the diocesan Synod, in which priests and laity are called to collaborate with the Bishop for the good of the whole ecclesial community, the Code of Canon Law devotes ample space to those that are usually called “bodies of communion” in the local Church: the Council of Priests, the College of Consultors, the Chapter of Canons and the Pastoral Council. Only to the extent that these organizations are connected with those on the ground, and begin with the people and their everyday problems, can a Synodal Church begin to take shape: even when they may proceed with fatigue, they must be understood as occasions of listening and sharing.

The second level is that of Ecclesiastical Provinces and Regions, of Particular (local Councils) and in a special way, Episcopal Conferences. We must reflect on realizing even more through these bodies – the intermediary aspects of collegiality – perhaps by integrating and updating some aspects of early church order. The hope of the Council that such bodies would help increase the spirit of episcopal collegiality has not yet been fully realized. As I have said, “In a Church Synod it is not appropriate for the Pope to replace the local Episcopates in the discernment of all the problems that lie ahead in their territories. In this sense, I feel the need to proceed in a healthy "decentralization."

The last level is that of the universal Church. Here the Synod of Bishops, representing the Catholic episcopate, becomes an expression of episcopal collegiality inside a church that is

synodal. It manifests the affective collegiality, which may well become in some circumstances "effective," joining the Bishops among themselves and with the Pope in the solicitude for the People God.

The commitment to build a Synodal Church to which all are called – each with his or her role entrusted to them by the Lord is loaded with ecumenical implications. For this reason, talking recently to a delegation of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, I reiterated the conviction that "careful consideration of how to articulate in the Church's life the principle of collegiality and the service of the one who presides offers a significant contribution to the progress of relations between our Churches."

I am convinced that in a synodal Church, the exercise of the Petrine primacy will receive greater light. The Pope is not, by himself, above the Church; but inside it as one baptized among the baptized, and within the College of Bishops as Bishop among Bishops; as one called at the same time as Successor of Peter – to lead the Church of Rome which presides in charity over all the Churches.

While I reiterate the need and urgency to think of "a conversion of the papacy," I gladly repeat the words of my predecessor Pope John Paul II: "As Bishop of Rome I know well [...] that the full and visible communion of all the communities in which, by virtue of God's faithfulness, his Spirit dwells, is the ardent desire of Christ. I am convinced that you have in this regard a special responsibility, above all in acknowledging the ecumenical aspirations of the majority of the Christian Communities and in heeding the request made of me to find a form of exercise of the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation."

Our gaze extends also to humanity. A synodal church is like a banner lifted up among the nations (cfr. Is 11:12) in a world that even though invites participation, solidarity and transparency in public administration – often hands over the destiny of entire populations into the greedy hands of restricted groups of the powerful. As a Church that "walks together" with men and women, sharing the hardships of history, let us cultivate the dream that the rediscovery of the inviolable dignity of peoples and the exercise of authority, even now will be able to help civil society to be founded on justice and fraternity, generating a more beautiful and worthy world for mankind and for the generations that will come after us.

(Linked [Here](#))