



General Congregations 16 – 23 October 2023

Spiritual Inputs

EMBARGO UNTIL SPEECH DELIVERED

The seed germinates

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In a few days' time, we shall go home for eleven months. This will be apparently a time of empty waiting. But it will be probably the most fertile time of the Synod, the time of germination. Jesus tells us: 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how'.

We have listened to hundreds of thousands of words during the last three weeks. Sometimes we have thought: 'Too many!' Most of these have been positive words, words of hope and aspiration. These are the seeds that are sown in the soil of the Church. They will be at work in our lives, in our imagination and our subconscious, during these months. When the moment is right, they will bear fruit.

The poet Austrian Rainer Maria Rilke wrote:

In spite of all the farmer's work and worry,
He can't reach down to where the seed is slowly
'Transmuted into summer'. The earth bestows.¹

Although nothing may appear to be happening, we can be confident that if our words are loving they will bud in the lives of people whom we do not know. As St Therese of Lisieux said, quoted by the Holy Father recently: "*C'est la confiance et rien que la confiance qui doit nous conduire à l'Amour*". "It is confidence and nothing but confidence that must lead us to Love"².

These eleven months will be like a pregnancy. Abraham and Sarah are promised that they will have descendants more numerous than the sand on the seashore. But nothing seems to happen. Sarah laughs when she hears this promise the third or fourth time, as she listens hidden in the tent to the strangers in Genesis 18. Probably a bitter sweet laugh. She has heard all this before, but she has remained barren. But in a year's time she will bear Isaac, the child of laughter.

So this is a time of quiet pregnancy. If you will forgive me, this reminds me of the first time I tried to make a speech in Spanish, in Latin America. A bishop got confused – which is very rare. He thought that I was an Irish Franciscan. I explained that I was an English Dominican. I

¹ The Sonnets to Orpheus XII', in *Selected Poems with Parallel German Text*, trans. Susan Ranson and Marielle Sutherland (Oxford, 2011), p.195

² https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231015-santateresa-delbambinogesu.html#_ftn1

said, 'El obispo esta embarazado'. I meant to say 'the bishop was embarrassed'. Alas I actually said was: 'The bishop is pregnant.' Even more rare!

This is a time of active waiting. Let me repeat the words of Simone Weil I quoted during the retreat. 'We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them... This way of looking is, in the first place, attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive the human being it is looking at, just as he or she is, in all their truth.'³

This is profoundly countercultural. The global culture of our time is often polarised, aggressive and dismissive of other people's views. The cry is: Whose side are you on? When we go home, people will ask, 'Did you fight for our side? Did you oppose those unenlightened other people?' We shall need be profoundly prayerful to resist the temptation to succumb to this party-political way of thinking. That would be to fall back into the sterile, barren language of much of our society. It is not the synodal way. The synodal process is organic and ecological rather than competitive. It is more like planting a tree than winning a battle, and as such will be hard for many to understand, sometimes including ourselves!

But if we keep our minds and hearts open to the people to the people whom we have met here, vulnerable to their hopes and fears, their words will germinate in our lives, and ours in theirs. There will an abundant harvest, a fuller truth. Then the Church will be renewed.

Humanity's first vocation in Paradise was to be gardeners. Adam tended creation, sharing in speaking God's creative words, naming the animals. In these eleven months, will we speak fertile, hope-filled words, or words that are destructive and cynical? Will our words nurture the crop or be poisonous? Shall we be gardeners of the future or trapped in old sterile conflicts? We each choose.

St Paul said to the Ephesians: 'Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear'. (4.9)

³ *Waiting on God*, trans Emma Crauford, London 1959, p.169.