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Retreat. At Lauds

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"How to be a Synodal Church in Mission?" Thirst for God, hidden source of synodal dialogues

A deep thanks to God for this beginning: the Gospel - at the heart of Lauds - repositions us, all of us. As Pope Francis told us a few weeks ago, at the Angelus: 'First: *wonder*, because Jesus' words surprise us. But Jesus always surprises us, always. Also today, in the lives of each one of us, Jesus keeps surprising us.' (18-08-'24). All the more so if we expose ourselves to the Gospel by drawing it into the great light of the Eucharist. It has in itself the power to dispose us for the journey. Let us make room for the amazed listening that repositions us, disposes us for this new beginning of our journey together.

Echoing the vigorous memory of Saint Jerome, the rough and choleric man, with strong passions, who easily quarrelled in his closest relationships, but who was also a careful scrutiniser of sacred Scripture, to the point of being transformed by it - today the Gospel speaks: it tells us of the conclusion of a stage of Jesus' itinerary, towards the beginning of the decisive stage. [*And we, we are entering a concluding stage (so to speak!) of the synodal journey*]. A mysterious conclusion that opens up the horizon in a disconcerting way, while the previous stage seems to be closing in on a shadow of failure: in fact, while everyone was admiring him, Jesus had just announced for the second time the approach of the 'handing over' of the Son of Man into the hands of men. And here, right here, Jesus opens up the horizon, rudely bringing the disciples' awkward *dialogismos* out into the open and enlightening them in their foolishness, through the simple gesture of bringing close, and establishing a small child beside him. Re-founding of the apostolic college. Living symbol of the disciple, also offered to us. Here, today. The least made living symbol.

Jesus in commenting on this prophetic gesture indirectly offers us a new vision on mission - and thus on the synodal path. "Anyone who welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me". Mission originates from the passion, the invincible attraction, of God towards the least, the *paidion*. It is a constant of

God's revelation in human history, from the first day of creation until Jesus. The 'sent' apostles (the mission) must always start afresh from here. The mission, without this way of 'being with him', is in vain.

But they, obtuse, though corrected by the Master, again reiterate their fundamentalist view that raises fences, that excludes the stranger. And in return Jesus, with meek tenacity, reveals that Abba desires everyone to be "with him" - and recognises everyone as "his". Starting with the small, the unimportant. And it is precisely from this stumbling block in the understanding between Jesus and his own that the "synodal" journey to Jerusalem begins. Here Christology and ecclesiology intertwine. Hence, the 2nd Session of the Synodal Assembly thus finds itself powerfully invited to set off: "... this [is the] question: *how* can the identity of the synodal People of God in mission take concrete form in the relationships, paths and places where the everyday life of the Church takes place?" (I.L. *Introduction*). Mission without this way of being 'with him' revealed in the *paidion*, is at best good volunteer work.

The *loghismoi*, the search for dialogue, the incommunicability between differences, the barriers between generations, between extremely different cultures: all the obstacles that we have measured well in these months of walking between one Assembly and the other, are here confronted with the measure of truth that - in the symbol - repositions us all: the small, indeed, the least. Jesus does not moralize here: he points out, in himself, the way and the pace.

How then, here, do we recognise ourselves as being called to the new stage of the synodal journey, to confrontations, to dialogues? How do we expose ourselves to the revealing, performing, transfiguring power of the Eucharist, and in it to the Gospel? The I.L. (I, 25; cf. also "Five parts..."), in the proposed fourth part, says that the synodal method also includes liturgical reference. I think not so much as a ritual procedure, but as an inspiring light.

We know what simplification of the world, the ridiculous discussions, power hierarchies, have produced: "... *which of them was the greatest*" (Lk 9:46) ...

How then to identify the 'smallest' in the epochal situation in which we live? The defenceless and trusting child, the lost young person, the prisoner in revolt, the migrant, the old man left alone, the unheard woman, the ... "who?"?

The art of dialogue re-founded here, in the synodal church, is decisive, an alternative to all the *dialogues* we more or less consciously carry in our hearts. An art that is born - we understand it from this Gospel - from a level of reality, which God assumes: from the pain of a perceived deafness. This patience of Jesus in making himself understood by those who - though chosen to be with him - remain deaf, is revealing: it says God. Who never gives up in his thirst for the human You. And he founds the art of dialogue. Martin Buber, in his writing on dialogue, offers a very incisive cassidian apophthegm in this regard: 'It is said that once upon a time a man enthusiastic about God, abandoning the realm of creation, wandered into the great void. There he wandered, until he came to the gates of God's secret. He knocked. From within he was asked: "What do you seek here?" He said: "I proclaimed thy praise to the ears of mortals, but

they were deaf to my word. So I come to you, that you yourself may hear me and answer me". "Turn back," was heard from within, "here is no ear for thee. I have drowned my hearing in mortal deafness". And in this Gospel, Jesus' meekness in snaring the disciples' 'deaf' thoughts speaks to this live drowning. This art of dialogue can only be learnt at his school: exposing oneself, to the point of being handed over as 'little ones', to the other.

To the "disorienting" Gospel, the psalms now prayed give horizon and resonance. Two powerful psalms. Gregory the Great says (Homilies on Ezekiel, I.I, 15) that - when prophecy fails in his people - and it often does! - it is the voice of the psalms that prepares in the darkened heart the way for the spirit of prophecy and the grace of compunction, the way that leads to Jesus. Wonderful.

As Jerome writes - today we remember! - in his rediscovered commentary on the Psalms: "The psalter is like a great house, which indeed has only one key on the outside for the door - and this key is the Holy Spirit; but it also has keys of its own for the different rooms within. Each room has its own key. If one throws away the keys in bulk, when one later wants to open that room, one cannot do so. Unless he finds the key again." It often happens with respect to the psalter that we have this carelessness to throw away the keys and consider them indecipherable, useless for prayer. Today, a day of retreat, it might be grace to find the key to enter these two wonderful psalms: "Like the deer that yearns for running streams, so my soul is yearning for you, my God". It is the voice of the church, it is the voice of the countless little ones waiting to be evangelised, it is the voice of "my soul" (Ps 41:2) in search. Two splendid psalms have been given to us today to give shape to the Praises of God. Ps 41 gives voice to that secret, unnameable thirst we carry within us. That thirst that is the soul of freedom. Thirst that corresponds to the thirst for God.

The cultures to which we belong are hesitant to expose themselves to this thirst, to integrate it into their symbolic systems, they struggle: so much so that they are tainted by the logics of business, power, market, fitness. Or by evasive logics. Which pursue dreams of freedom as self-determination: but the psalm we have just heard reawakens the thirst for the Living God. He, the Living One, thirsts for this thirst, as the ancient monk attests: 'God thirsts for those who thirst for him'. And Teresa of Calcutta humbly reminded us of this. To expose oneself at length to its light, to dwell in the Gospel 'as in the flesh of Christ' (*Ignatius of A.*): this is retreat. How to welcome close to oneself, in oneself, the child.

On Psalm 41, Abba Poemen, a monk in the Egyptian desert, said: "It is written: 'As the deer longs for the fountains of water, so my soul longs for you, O God'. As the deer in the desert devour many reptiles and, when the poison burns them, they yearn to come to the waters where they find relief from the burning of the ingested poisons, so the monks who live in the desert are burnt by the bitterness of the passions and therefore yearn for the Sabbath and Sunday to

come for the synaxis, to draw from the fountains of waters, that is, from the body and blood of the Lord who purifies from the bitterness of the evil one" (Apophytes, Alf., 30).

Poemen applies the spiritual movement of Psalm 41 to the reality of the desert, we could - having found the key - pray the psalm by disposing ourselves to the Synodal Assembly as the place where the Spirit quenches our thirst in the desire to conform our church to the arduous mission that the Lord, in this desert of today, entrusts to it. Like a little child. A yearning memory and an anxious hope are breathed in the psalm: let us allow ourselves to be penetrated by its questions ("When?", "Where is he?", "Why?"), to compose memory and hope in a superior harmony. From the abyss (v. 8) of a today that we can hardly read - yet we are called to interpret it as the today of the mission -, to the abyss of Mercy.

The memory of a past - albeit beautiful, but now archived - must be transformed into humble hope. The spring - as John of the Cross discovered in his 'night' - is gushing forth and always offered. In the Eucharist, which also quenches our thirst today. Here we find the reasons for hope.

"The heavens proclaim" sings the second psalm: it is language not words whose sound is heard. A silent proclamation, requiring new senses. A proclamation that awaits ears, eyes, hands, nose, mouth, to be tasted. To grasp the unspeakable. Even of our human, ecclesial affairs of today: throughout the earth, to the ends of the earth, we are in search of new proclamations that open up the horizon of hope.

Pope Francis sketches out some avenues on which to try to trace the proclamation that defeats solitude and muteness: "In this universe, shaped by open and intercommunicating systems, we can discern countless forms of relationship and participation. This leads us to think of the whole as open to God's transcendence, within which it develops. Faith allows us to interpret the meaning and the mysterious beauty of what is unfolding. We are free to apply our intelligence towards things evolving positively" (Laudato si', 79). " If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs" (Laudato si', 11). This also concerns the way of approaching the synodal dialogue. (...) We can say that "alongside revelation properly so-called, contained in sacred Scripture, there is a divine manifestation in the blaze of the sun and the fall of night" (L.S., 85). By paying attention to this manifestation, human beings learn to recognise themselves in relation to other creatures: "I express myself in expressing the world; in my effort to decipher the sacredness of the world, I explore my own" (L.S., 85). "As the Catechism teaches: "God wills the interdependence of creatures. The sun and the moon, the cedar and the little flower, the eagle and the sparrow: the spectacle of their countless diversities and inequalities tells us that no creature is self-sufficient.

Creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other” (L.S, 86).

"Without language, without words, without their voice being heard".

But the moment the Bible witnesses the proclamation of the stars and recognises them as the language of God, that non-verbal language also becomes the word of humanity narrating the non-word of God.

So when we read his most astonishing word - 'the Word became flesh' - in that word we must also include the non-words of the sun, the stars, the cosmos, ... our dialogues open to the coming of the Spirit - all the words of the earth and all the 'words' of heaven.

The stars are not God, but His creatures - *the heavens proclaim the glory of God*. - They do not carry a message of their own, but signify Others, also 'words' spoken, to direct the thirst that dwells in us and drives us - in dialogue - towards the Source.

*The spring that brims and ripples oh I know
in the dark of night.*

(John of the Cross)

*Waters that flow forever and a day through a lost country
oh I know the way
in dark of night.*

*Its-origin no knowing, for there's none.
But well I know, from here all sources run
in dark of night.*

*No other thing has such delight to give.
Here earth and the wide heavens drink to live
in dark of night.*

*Though some would wade, the wave's unforded still.
Nowhere a bottom, measure as you will
in dark of night.*

*A stream so clear, and never clouded? Never.
The wellspring of all splendor whatsoever*

in dark of night.

*Bounty of waters flooding from this well
invigorates all earth, high heaven, and hell
in dark of night.*

*A current the first fountain gave birth to
Is also great and what it would, can do
In dark of night.*

*Two merging currents of the living spring—
from these a third, no less astonishing
in dark of night.*

*O fountain surging to submerge again
deep in the living bread that's life to men
in dark of night.*

*Song of the waters calling: come and drink.
Come, all you creatures, to the shadowy brink
in dark of night.*

*This spring of living water I desire,
here in the bread of life I see entire
in dark of night.*