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PRESS CONFERENCE for the presentation of the *Instrumentum laboris* for the first session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 20 June 2023

Presentation by Cardinal Mario Grech, Secretary General of the General Secretariat of the Synod

Good morning. For those of us here today, it is indeed a good morning. And we trust that it is for the whole Church. With this press conference, in fact, the *Instrumentum laboris* (IL) for the first session of the Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops next October is made public. Like every event of grace, this presentation is also a "today" of God, a "today" of the Church, a sign, though small, but a sign nonetheless. If you prefer, this presentation is a seed that can produce much fruit: "thirty and sixty and a hundredfold" (Mk 4:20). It is up to all of us, even you, dear journalists.

Some might perceive this image of the seed as rhetorical. In reality, the text we are presenting is the fruit of a synodal process that – we have often repeated – has involved the whole Church and everyone in the Church, in the context of the "perfecting" of the Synod of Bishops from an event to a process, desired by Pope Francis (cf. EC, art. 4).

The purpose of the first phase was "the consultation of the People of God" (EC, Art. 5). The Synod does not begin next October, as if the journey so far had been something superfluous or a mere preparatory act. The Synod began on 10 October 2021, with the opening celebration in St. Peter's. Since then, the first phase has been divided into three stages. The first was in the local Churches, with the consultation of the People of God. This invitation was addressed to all, particularly to the peripheries and those who, for one reason or another, feel excluded. The second stage was in the Episcopal Conferences with the Bishops' discernment of the contributions of the local Churches. The third stage was in the Continental Assemblies, with a new level of discernment in view of the second phase of the Synod.

This listening is necessary because a synodal Church is, by definition, a "Church of listening": listening to one another in order to hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church (cf. FRANCIS, *Address on the 50th anniversary of the Synod*, 17 October 2015). A synodal Church listens, first of all, to the People of God because the People of God, through their participation in the prophetic function of Christ, is the subject of the *sensus fidei*, that is, of that function of the totality of the Baptised that is *infallible in credendo* (cf. LG 12). I know that many do not understand or underestimate this function, claiming that the People of God do not have the tools to offer a real contribution to the synodal process. To me this is a grave insult. And while it is partly true that within the holy People of God there are those who suffer from a sense of inferiority, this is not their fault! In fact, lived experience has shown the opposite: where the Bishops have initiated and accompanied the consultation, the contribution has been alive and deep. The same is true at the level of Parishes, Congregations of Consecrated Life or Lay associations and movements, where those in authority have accompanied and stimulated the consultation.

There is no need to fear that listening to the People of God has compromised the pastoral function of the Bishops. On the contrary, the synodal process has restored a fruitful ministry to the Bishops, both as

Pastors of their Churches and as members of the collegial bodies that have been called upon to carry out a careful discernment of the contributions of the consultation: that is, first in the Episcopal Conferences and then in the Continental Assemblies. During these two years I have met bishops who were skeptical at first, but by walking more closely with the People of God entrusted to them, they found an invaluable treasure!

I am not afraid to describe the first phase, in which the Church has been engaged for two years, as a process of profound reciprocity between prophecy and discernment: prophecy because all "have been anointed by the Holy One" (1Jn 2:20); discernment because inspirations must be scrutinised (cf. 1Jn 4:1). What the Apostle said applies to the synod process: "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good" (1 Thess 5:19-21).

The IL is the fruit of this listening process, the culmination of a "walk together" that also serves as a point of departure for the second phase of the Synod, that of the dual Assembly in October 2023 and October 2024.

I insist on this point, responding to those who fear that the Synod's conclusions have already been written. The greatest concern of the Synod Secretariat and mine personally was to always respect what emerged from the stages of the synod process. We did this right from the Preparatory Document, when we asked what steps "the Spirit invites us to take to grow as a synodal Church". We did it with the *Document for the Continental Stage*, when we gathered the voices of the Churches. We do it now, with the IL, which returns the entire listening of the first phase through the discernment of the Continental Assemblies. It is about respecting the Holy Spirit who – Pope Francis often repeats it – is the protagonist of the synodal process. To presume to write the conclusions first would be tantamount to blaspheming the Spirit (cf. Mt 12:31)!

You will not find in the text a theoretical systematic explanation of synodality, but the fruit of a Church experience, of a journey in which we have all learnt more by walking together and questioning ourselves on the meaning of this experience. I can say that the IL is a text in which no one's voice is missing: that of the holy People of God; of the Pastors, who have ensured ecclesial discernment with their participation; of the Pope, who has always accompanied us, supported us and encouraged us to move forward. The IL is also an opportunity for the entire People of God to continue the journey that has begun, and an opportunity to involve those who have not been involved so far.

For this reason, it is my pleasure to conclude that the IL is not a document of the Holy See, but of the whole Church. It is not a document written at a desk. It is a document in which all are co-authors, each for the part he or she is called to play in the Church, in docility to the Spirit. And it is the Holy Spirit whom we invoke, that He may sustain us in the further stages of the synodal process, so that we may continue to "run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (Heb 12:1-2).