



The Holy See

**DISCOURSE OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE COUNCIL OF THE GENERAL SECRETARIAT
OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS**

Saturday, 30 April 1983

Beloved Brothers,

1. During your last meeting of the Council of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, during which you drafted the lines of the *Instrumentum laboris* ("working paper"), you wanted to propose a Special Session to be dedicated particularly to the internal problems of this young though already well-experienced ecclesial institution. You took upon yourself a labour supplementary to the ordinary work. And now you are about to bring it to conclusion. I thank you all from my heart, and along with you I thank the officials of the Secretariat and the experts who with their thorough studies have provided a wide basis for your reflection on the function and functioning of the Synod of Bishops.

This meeting of yours has been like the pause of a worker who, after finishing a part of the task, stops for a moment to reconsider the motives which inspired him and to summon up his courage to face the rest of the work to be done. The Synod of Bishops sprang up in the fertile terrain of the Second Vatican Council, was able to see the sun thanks to the sensitive mind of my predecessor, Paul VI, and began to bear its fruits right from the first Ordinary Assembly in 1967, held in the same hall where we are now. Since that time, meeting at the regular intervals, but also sometimes trying another type of meeting, the Synod of Bishops has contributed in a most noteworthy manner to the implementation of the teachings and the doctrinal and pastoral directives of the Second Vatican Council in the life of the universal church. The synodal key to reading the Council has become as it were a place for interpretation, application and development of the Second Vatican Council. The rich list of subjects treated in the various Synods alone reveals the importance of its meetings for the Church and for the implementation of the reforms intended by the Council.

In the face of this wealth of fruits already produced and of potential not yet realized by the still young synodal institution, it is right above all to give thanks to God because he willed to inspire its foundation and to guide its work. But it is also right, at a distance of these years, to pause in a reflection based on the experience acquired.

2. The Synod of Bishops has therefore rendered great service to the Second Vatican Council and can render still more in the application and development of the Council's directives. The experience of the post-conciliar period shows clearly in what noteworthy measure the synodal activity can set the pace for the pastoral life of the universal Church.

In the synodal meetings, the individual local Churches of every continent are represented by their respective pastoral delegates. Already during the preparatory stage they are consulted and their experience of the life of faith is then brought to the meeting by the bishops. During the meeting, an exchange of information and suggestions takes place; and in the light of the Gospel and of the Church's doctrine common directives are set out which, once sealed with the approval of the Successor of St. Peter, flow back to the benefit of the same local Churches so that the entire Church may preserve communion in the plurality of cultures and situations. In this way, the Synod of Bishops is also a magnificent confirmation of the Church's reality in which the episcopal college, "insofar as it is composed of many, expresses the variety and universality of the People of God, but insofar as it is assembled under one head, it expresses the unity of the flock of Christ" (*Lumen gentium*, 22).

Certainly, the Synod is the instrument of collegiality and a powerful factor in communion in a measure different from an Ecumenical Council. However, it is always a question of an effective, flexible, timely and punctual instrument at the service of all the local Churches and their reciprocal communion. This aim, which always accompanies this "special permanent Council of holy pastors", has always been present in it since its institution. As Paul VI said in his Apostolic Letter *Apostolica sollicitudo*, "that even after the Council there may continue to reach the Christian people that great abundance of benefits which during the Council happily came from our close union with the bishops".

For the Synod to be able to yield these benefits ever more, much depends on the concrete application which is given to the conclusions reached by the Synod, under the guidance of the pastors and the episcopal Conferences, in the individual local Churches. This post-Synod phase therefore requires much attention and particular care.

3. The dynamic force of the Synod of Bishops is rooted - as you have well emphasized - in the proper understanding and in the life of the collegiality of the bishops. In fact, the Synod is a particularly fruitful expression and the very valuable instrument of episcopal collegiality, that is, of the particular responsibility of the bishops around the Bishop of Rome.

The Synod is a way of expressing the collegiality of the bishops. All the bishops of the Church, of the episcopate with the Bishop of Rome, Successor of Peter, "the perpetual and visible source and foundation of . . . unity" (*Lumen gentium*, 23) at their head, form the college which succeeds the apostolic one with Peter as the head. The solidarity which binds them and the concern for the entire Church are manifested to the highest degree when all the bishops are gathered *cum Petro et sub Petro* ("with Peter and under Peter") in the Ecumenical Council. Obviously, there exists a qualitative difference between the Council and the Synod, but notwithstanding that, the Synod expresses collegiality in a highly intense way, even while it does not equal that achieved by the Council.

This collegiality is manifested principally in the collegial way the pastors of the local Churches express themselves. When, especially after a good community preparation in their own Churches and a collegial one in their episcopal Conferences, with the responsibility of their own particular Churches, but along with concern for the entire Church, they together attest to the faith and the life of faith, their vote, if morally unanimous, has a qualitative ecclesial weight which surpasses the merely formal aspect of the consultative vote.

The vitality of a Synod depends, in fact, on the thoroughness of its preparation at the level of the ecclesial communities and of the episcopal Conferences; the better the collegiality among the bishops which expresses communion in the individual Churches functions in the concrete, the richer the contribution can be which they bring to the synodal Assembly. The exercise of collegiality by the pastors at the Synod becomes a mutual exchange which also serves the communion of the bishops and the faithful and finally, the ever deeper and more organic unity of the Church. The Synod is therefore at the service of the ecclesial communion which is nothing but the very unity of the Church in its dynamic dimension.

All the elements find their place and their function in the mystery of the Church. And so the function of the Bishop of Rome places him deeply in the body of bishops as centre and fulcrum of episcopal communion; his primacy, which is a service for the benefit of the whole Church, places him in a relationship of union and closer collaboration. The Synod itself makes the intimate connection between collegiality and primacy stand out: the task of the Successor of Peter is also service to the collegiality of the bishops, and conversely the effective and affective collegiality of the bishops is an important aid to the primatial Petrine service.

4. As every human institution, the Synod of Bishops also is growing and will be able to grow and to develop its potential even more, as moreover my predecessor foresaw in his Letter *Apostolica sollicitudo*. Some synodal forms, although having been earlier planned, have not yet been adequately realized. You yourselves have examined various procedural and methodological possibilities and various proposals put forward during the course of this institute's existence. For my part, you may be sure of my highest consideration for the function of the Synod of Bishops in the Church and of the complete confidence I place in its activity at the service of the universal

Church.

And it is in this context that I renew my appreciation and gratitude for your efforts, invoking upon your work the blessing of God and the protection of the Mother of the Church.

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