

Servants of light and witnesses of hope



Dearest Brothers and Sisters,

I write this letter after having lived the experience of the Synod of Bishops, the first session of which took up the whole month of October, in expectation of being concluded within a year by the second session. All can read the Synthesis Report of the synod, entitled, “A Synodal Church in Mission,” which was published at the end of the first session (29 October 2023), as well as the Letter to the People of God publicized on 25 October. They are documents that seek to echo a month of prayer, work, meetings, listening, discussions, and that want to help the whole Church continue this path toward and beyond the closing of this Synod on synodality.

This letter of mine only wants to put emphasis on some aspects of this experience to encourage our participation in the current stage of the synodal journey of the Church. We are all invited to receive and experience what the Holy Spirit is saying to the whole Church and to the particular Churches like our Order, our communities, along with all the people who make the journey with us. May the time of Advent and Christmas help us to receive these suggestions with a poor, listening, mendicant heart; a heart disposed to the conversion that is asked of us in order to receive with joy the Christ who comes to save the world.

The Synod and the war

The world is ever more divided and at war. What does this tragic circumstance demand of us? It is not enough to be informed about it, to express horror and solidarity. It is not enough to condemn the culpable and feel like we are close to the victims. “Do not the pagans do the same?” (Mt 5:47). We Christians are called to do more. Not because we are better or more capable, but because we have received more. We have Christ, and Christ is all that humanity needs. “Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life,” exclaims St. John (1 Jn 5:12). Christ is all, Christ is peace. In Jesus we have the peace needed by the peoples at war, oppressed peoples, communities in conflict, divided families, hearts troubled by their own evil or by that of others.

So we must sincerely ask ourselves: why do we give so little Christ? Why, having in him everything, do we not give him to the world that has such need of him? But how should we give him? Why, when we are convinced to give him, he seems to us so little received? Perhaps because we give him badly? Perhaps because we do not truly give him? Perhaps because the way in which we think of giving him in reality hides him,

or keeps him for ourselves? Perhaps because we feel so inadequate to this task just because we have become smaller, more fragile and tired?

We must not forget the fundamental concern of the Synod: to help the Church to be in the world of today a “sign and instrument of the intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (*Lumen Gentium* 1). Thought of the wars in Ukraine and the Holy Land, made more intense by the presence at the Synod of some members who come from those lands, constantly accompanied our being together and made it even more fervent and urgent to be aware of this essential mission with which the Second Vatican Council defined the Church. If the whole Church does not say, “Here I am, send me!” (Is 6:8) to receive from God the grace of being a sign and instrument of communion with God and of the unity of the human race, humanity risks self-destruction, at all levels and in all ways. A sign has meaning if the reality that it points to is realized; an instrument has meaning if it completes the task that it must exercise. Every person’s filial union with God and the fraternal unity of all mankind are what give meaning to the Church. The Church, and every community and person that composes her, is realized by the mission in service of communion.

The Light of the nations

Lumen Gentium begins with these words: “Christ is the Light of nations. Because this is so, this Sacred Synod gathered together in the Holy Spirit eagerly desires, by proclaiming the Gospel to every creature (cf. Mk 16:15), to bring the light of Christ to all men, a light brightly visible on the countenance of the Church” (LG 1).

The Church is sign and instrument of the light of the nations that is Christ. The true face of the Church, notwithstanding all the incoherences of her members, is the face of a bride shining with love for the Bridegroom. It reflects the infinite love that the Bridegroom fosters for her and, through her, for all mankind. The Church cannot experience the love of Christ without feeling herself burn with the desire to communicate it, to reflect the light of Christ to the whole world. The Church need not create the light: she must only reflect it, like the moon, like a mirror. The cleaner the mirror is, the more it reflects the light without diminishing it or changing it. Every reform of the Church, every reform of an Order or of a community, like every true personal conversion, is not for demonstrating one’s own beauty, but for reflecting the beauty of Christ without shadows and opacity. The beauty of Christ is the whole beauty of God manifested to the world.

If we are aware of this, we understand that we all, without exception, can reflect this light, because it illuminates us totally. When Jesus looks upon a sinner, when he looks upon the adulterous woman, or Zacchaeus, or the Samaritan woman, or Peter while he is denying him, in his eyes, on his face, shines the whole light of his love. We should not fear that our wretchedness will screen us from the light of Christ. If the wretchedness of sinful mankind were able to impede the light of Jesus’s face from illuminating the world, no one would have met him, no one would have followed him, no one would have been converted. Nothing can hinder the merciful light of Christ’s gaze upon man.

Hiding the Light

The real problem is that we ourselves can hide this light. We cannot extinguish it, we cannot prevent it from shining upon us, but we can hide it. Jesus said so clearly when he reminded his disciples that “people do not light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house” (Mt 5:15).

What madness to put a lighted lamp under a basket or, as the Gospel of Mark adds, “under a bed” (Mk 4:21). And yet we often do just that. In a thousand ways we cede to the temptation to hide the light of Christ from our eyes and from those of others. We do not let the world see that we are friends of the Lord, that we are his. As a Church, we are called to be sign and instrument of the light of Christ that illuminates our face, but often it is like we are ashamed to show it. The issue is not “making propaganda” for Christ, or “proselytizing,” but simply not hiding Jesus, who gives himself to us so gratuitously. Sometimes in speaking of Him or proclaiming his Gospel we are concerning ourselves perhaps more with spreading the light of our face than with reflecting his.

Jesus says not to hide the light under a bed or a basket. What do these curious images symbolize? Whoever was listening to Jesus at that moment must have smiled. Perhaps the bed symbolizes our laziness, our search for comfort, our lack of vigilance and attention. The basket, instead, is a pail that was used for measuring grain and calculating its price. Hence it was an instrument for calculating and doing commerce with its contents. Light, however, is not sold: it gives itself on its own, it is a gift in itself. By nature it lights up everything, unless we hide it to keep it for ourselves, to sleep on it or trade with it. Jesus summons us not to hide his light under our comforts or under our measure and thirst for gain.

Each of us can examine his or her own life, every community can examine itself, as for example the *Carta Caritatis* asks us to do in every General Chapter, a supremely synodal meeting, or during the canonical Visitations. How and under what do we hide the light of the world that is Christ? The whole Church is called to this by the Synod and always. The Church must be reformed not to be beautiful herself, but not to hide the face of the Lord who looks upon the world with infinite compassion and love.

Servants of the light

It is enough not to hide the light of Christ, it is enough to put it on a lampstand so that it shine on everyone. At times we make our mission and testimony complicated, because we think that they require great talents, courage, intelligence, or sanctity. But if the light is granted to us, if it comes to us, like the proclamation to the shepherds or the star of the Magi, it is enough to put it on a lampstand, that is, not to hide it. A person or a community that simply does not hide the presence of Christ, his friendship, the truth of his word, becomes a lampstand and thus lives out the fullness of its mission. Often it is the people or communities that are humanly speaking the least significant that manifest Christ with greater clarity, precisely because, with them, Jesus can be fully himself, expressing all the tenderness of his presence.

The whole Christian life, and the whole monastic life, require an asceticism, not to kindle the light, but to receive it and put it on a lampstand. On the day of our Baptism we receive the light of Christ, that which is kindled on the Paschal Night. From that moment on, all of life is called to keep this flame lighted and to transmit it to all. Whoever hides it under a basket or under a bed hinders his or her baptism from bearing fruit. The fruit of Baptism is that our life serve the splendor of the Lord's face.

Also the two disciples of Emmaus, whose journey is the paradigm of Christian synodality, felt something like a flame burning in their heart, kindled by the presence and the word of the Risen One. When they opened their eyes to the Eucharistic splendor of the gift of Christ to the world, symbolized by the broken bread, they immediately ran to bear this light to the brothers and sisters in Jerusalem.

We can have the same experience in our life, if we let ourselves truly be guided by that which the Church, and in particular our vocation, offer us so that we receive and transmit the light of Christ.

Light is above all the Word of God, the Gospel, that we have been called to listen to by meditating on Sacred Scripture, but also by listening to Jesus who mysteriously speaks to us through everyone and everything, because He is the Word who is expressed in every creature, and who especially loves to speak to us through little ones and the poor, from whom the secrets of the Father are not hidden (cf. Mt 11:12).

Light is the communal life, which is the life of the Body of the Lord, in which the people of God makes its daily steps on the path of history toward the heavenly Jerusalem. Cultivating fraternal life means keeping the flame of the love of Christ lighted in the world.

Light is the Cross, on which the offering of all the culpable and innocent sufferings of our heart and of mankind are immediately transformed by the Holy Spirit into the fullness of love and fruitfulness, as in Mary, Mother of all the children of God.

Light is humility, the poverty of our hearts and in relationships, that unites us to the light of Christ like wood is joined to fire. Humility itself is light, poverty itself shines, because they add nothing to the love of Christ but the material that lets itself be entirely burned without keeping anything back.

So we can say that *when we listen and walk together, offering ourselves with humble poverty, there comes to be among us the agreement that is more precious and luminous than our differences: Jesus Christ himself!*

The light of hope

Pope Francis constantly summons us to be witnesses of hope in the midst of a divided and disoriented world. Hope, in fact, is the light of Christ who comes to take care of the wounds of mankind.

What does it mean to have and bear witness to hope?

Often we link our hope to reasons that make us foresee a better future. If a vocation arrives in the monastery, we have hope that the community will survive. If during a sickness we see that the treatments start to have an effect, we have hope of being completely healed.

But true Christian hope is not founded on reasons that make us expect a better future. Christian hope has a single foundation: faith in God, trust in the Father, communion with Christ who is present and walks with us.

This hope, which is stronger than every human hope founded only on unstable reasons, is a grace, a gift of the Spirit. This makes us live not from what the world gives us or what we can be or do ourselves, but from God who gives himself to us, who accompanies us like a good Shepherd and who lives in us. Christ himself is our hope, the only hope that does not disappoint.

The hopes founded on transient reasons sooner or later disappoint. They make us expect a dreamy future that rarely becomes reality, or if it becomes reality is a reality that does not last and that disappoints our heart's expectations. They are the hopes of the foolish rich man described by Jesus in the Gospel, who says to himself: "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'" (Lk 12:19-20).

Hope is rather the virtue of the poor and the humble who rely solely on trust in God. It is the virtue that does not reduce itself to awaiting a better future but that changes the present now, filling the circumstances we live in with peace, even when they are difficult, tiring, full of pitfalls. What makes life better is not first of all changing the circumstances, but the conversion of our heart that recognizes that Jesus is here, walks with us, speaks to us, loves us, forgives us, and helps us forgive and love each other.

This is the testimony that truly brings hope to the world; this is the light of Christ in our life that we should not hide and that we need to help make shine with humility and simplicity, with the joy of the shepherds of Bethlehem who, after having seen the light in the Child and having received it in their heart, immediately put it on the lampstand of their face and their word to illuminate all mankind with it.

Let us exchange, by prayer and adoration, this Christmas greeting, and let us continue to walk together, driven on and sustained by the hope that reveals the light of Christ to the world!



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