

## **The Sign of Unity**

### **Interview with our Confreere about the Synod of Bishops**

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#### **The Synod of Bishops and the Church**

- 1. What is your perception of the Church based on what you saw, heard, experienced, and reflected on during these days of the Synod?*

The Synod gave me the chance to experience just how Catholic our Church is. It is the first time that I participated in an ordinary Synod, and it gave me the chance to meet bishops from all over the world: from countries large and small, from countries rich in ancient Christian traditions, as well as from countries where the faith was implanted just a short time ago. From everything that was said, as I listened to the various interventions, and the different reflections, I came to see just how universal, and thus how Catholic we are as a Church.

- 2. What, in your opinion, was the strongest call that the Synod made to the Catholic Church?*

It wasn't expressly said, but, without a doubt, the strongest call of the Synod was for unity within the Catholic Church. Even though there is so much division in the world, our Church has remained united. Today this unity is expressed with Peter and under Peter.

For myself, this unity is essential. Let me cite an example. I am the president of the small Episcopal Conference of Ethiopia and Eritrea, composed of 11 bishops. Unfortunately, these two countries have been at war. Nonetheless, the bishops have remained together; no one wished to split the Conference in two. This has not been easy. There have been some tensions, but we have remained in one Conference of Ethiopia and Eritrea. The Holy Father has encouraged us to work together in this way. Our small Conference has thus been a sign of hope to our people, even though the other Churches have been divided, the other religions—even the Moslems were divided among themselves—the soldiers, the politicians. Wherever you look there has been division. Our experience has taught me the importance of unity, and just as many times one can fall into the temptation of dividing, one must hold on to what is essential in order to remain united.

- 3. What can the Church expect from this important meeting of the Synod?*

It can expect a lot of things. In comparison to other Synods, this session focused on the figure of the bishop himself. I would not have imagined that one could have spoken of the role of the bishop for a whole month. I thought that only the priests would have spoken about the bishops, and not the bishops themselves, because it is easy for the priests to speak about the bishops, but it is not easy to speak of oneself. I discovered that the bishop has a fundamental role in the Church, not simply because he is the successor to the apostles, but because he has duties. He must teach, sanctify, and govern. At the same time, the figure of the bishop emerges from many parts of the world as a spiritual father, leaving the role of governance in second position. I myself believe that, above all, a bishop must be a father to all the faithful, and a brother close to his priests and to his religious, to everyone. Moreover, since I come from an Oriental Church, this aspect is very interesting for me, since this is our vision of the person of the bishop. The bishop is a spiritual father, free from worldly cares, a neutral party. When in my country a bishop is called “*our father*,” the people don’t think that he knows how to do everything, but that he be a father to everyone—not an administrator, or an intellectual, but a father, close to his people, sharing the life of these persons, ready to stay with them.

The distinctive note of the bishop is that he is the sign of hope, just as the title of the Synod states. Hope is important for all those who make up society: the young, the adults, families, priests, everyone. If the bishop truly is a sign of hope, then he must give a strong boost to life, and he must communicate a desire for people to continue to live. Among us, especially, where there is so much poverty and so much unemployment, he must be able to offer some hope to everyone, even to those who are not Christian. It is a very strong call, which in this Synod was felt by many bishops. In today’s world, where we witness sad scenes of divisions, tensions, and civil wars, many bishops, especially those from countries that have not known war or suffering, took notice of this call. We live in these conditions here almost every day.

Thus, for many bishops, this experience touched them deeply. Still, the question remains: how to be this sign of hope? There were many interventions on this theme.

### **The Methodology Used for Discussion**

#### *4. What evaluation would you make of the methodology used during the course of the present Synod?*

It’s a little difficult for me to evaluate the methodology because it is the first time that I participated in the Synod. The methodology I took note of points the way towards *consensus*. One doesn’t take up *controversies*, because the methodology works in such a way that one arrives directly at *consensus*. There still exist, however, many points of discussion, of controversy, even though not properly of division, but one doesn’t here of them, because they get lost in the process. A commission was set up to deal with these controversies, but one doesn’t know what will come of all this. I have no fear of

controversies, of different points of view. I would welcome these, but the methodology probably didn't offer many possibilities in this manner.

On the other hand, it is difficult to make room for every dissent in an adequate way, given the number of bishops participating (we were 350!). The very task of keeping such a large group in motion is not easy. However, everyone had the chance to speak. I spook, too, obviously. My question was: *what will we end up with at the end?* What is always evident is the consensus of the whole group, rather than differences or controversies. I ask myself simply where these controversies will end up. I don't know what the methodology will be in the future: we spoke of it, we studied it, we criticized it, and we made proposals. We will see.

## **Consecrated Life**

### *5. What can persons of consecrated life expect from this Synod?*

Because the bishop has a connection to everyone—from lay people to monks and religious, it is important that all these connections maintain a high level of importance. He must give prominence to people of consecrated life, receive them in his diocese, and have a cordial and open relationship with them, while respecting their own charism. There were bishops who spoke of tension in the administration of their dioceses, referring to the fact that in some cases there was a predominance of some religious. Now, in this case the bishop is called to create equilibrium, encouraging openness in relations, because only where relationships are frank and free of tension can everyone feel as if they are truly accepted.

### *6. What were, in your opinion, the “Vincentian ideas” that came out of the Synod?*

There were many of them. In the first place, it was said that the bishop is to be poor. For those of us in the Third World, this is nothing new, but for others it was a point that struck them greatly. To be poor, and to be simple: there is no doubt that these are Vincentian virtues. The intervention by Fr. Maloney that spoke of the humility of the bishop, of his need to be close to the poor, touched not only me, but also many others. He took his starting point from St. Vincent: “The bishop must be a father, and a brother to the poor, close to them: the voice of the poor.” I also said this, that the bishop must be the voice of the poor, as well as the father to his priests. It would be important to seek a way not to create such a great gap between the bishop and his priests; that being said, one needs to ask how this can be achieved in large dioceses with many priests. How can the bishop truly be just a simple father for them? I think that, among the Vincentian virtues, simplicity comes to the fore first. There was also some talk about the counter-sign that the bishop needs to be in relation to the appearance of having material things. Certainly,

the people want poverty and simplicity from a bishop. If a bishop has resources at his disposal, he needs to divide them, to think of others rather than of himself.

*7. Did the discussion in this Synod call to your mind the person of Justin de Jacobis?*

Certainly. One of the points of discussion we took up was inculturation. When one speaks of inculturation, it is important to respect the culture of the people in which whom he evangelizes. St. Justin de Jacobis was certainly a great example of this for our people. He was truly one with the Ethiopians: he learned their language and their liturgy; he ate with them, and he slept with them. He was accepted because he did so, he became part of the culture, and he became an Ethiopian. When the people speak of him in Ethiopia, they think of him as an Ethiopian. They don't think of him as Italian. He is one of our Ethiopian saints.

St. Justin is a great symbol of what inculturation is. During these days, I also heard bishops speak about Matteo Ricci in China. It is most important to respect the language, the culture and the civilization of the country one goes to. If, for example, Ethiopia is a poor country materially and economically, it is not poor spiritually or historically; much the opposite is true. We are also rich from a religious point of view. All of this takes in the culture of a people. To become one with the culture is an exceptionless condition for inculturating the Gospel. If the Gospel is not inculturated, it remains out of reach of the people. There will not be that true evangelization which the Pope speaks of. In this sense, St. Justin is a great example for a Vincentian Bishop.

## **Eritrea and Ethiopia**

*8. Your united Episcopal Conference is a sign for the two countries. How do the rulers and the people look at it?*

At first the two governments looked at us with suspicion, and they asked themselves why we were united. But it was the people who gave a lot of credibility to the Catholic Church. For this reason, when one speaks of rehabilitation, reconstruction and reconciliation in peace, people believe us, because they have seen our witness of unity during the time of the war. I think that unity is important at the universal level of Church as well. There can certainly be different movements, and different viewpoints on some aspects of our social situation, but we have only one founder. In the same way, the teaching of the Church speaks of Jesus as the one Savior, something that provokes even today strong reactions in the world. But our unity is founded on this concept: Jesus Christ is our only Savior. In this vision there is no North America or South America, no Europe, Africa, or Asia. As the Catholic Church we are one with Peter and under the leadership of Peter. This interests me greatly. Our own brother delegates of other confessions, for instance, the Protestants from different countries, reaffirmed this

concept. This Church is interesting when one things of unity, certainly with all our diversity, but to be united right up till today is something very important.

## **Personal Significance**

9. *What do you think will be the personal significance for you of this Synod in your own ministry as a bishop?*

Principally, I felt like I was not alone. I think of how difficult it is to function in large archdioceses like ours in Ethiopia, with more than 300,000 square kilometers, 20 million residents, and few Catholics. What is important for us is not to make Catholic converts, because our people are already Orthodox Christiana. What is important for us is that we be present. To be present in the world of work, in society: these are the things that are important. It has been important for me to come to know that many bishops, also those who live in countries actually at war, have the same difficulties as we do. It was most helpful to me to hear their experiences. It has given me encouragement. They told me that, even if there are so many problems in my Archdiocese, even if I live in a poor country like Ethiopia, I am not alone. I found myself with brothers who are Archbishops of large archdioceses like London or Bogotá; I am thus not alone.

10. *What feelings did you have as you lived the experience of the Synod?*

I felt like a student. We arrived at the Synod; they gave us a packet of materials and an assigned place to sit. As if it were the first day of school, we looked around to see whom we were sitting next to. I had the Archbishop of Lisbon near me, and an archbishop from Perú. I learned a lot, not just from the interventions, but from the friendly exchanges during the breaks, or during a little excursion outside of Rome, like that one when we went to visit the community of the Focolarini [founder: Chiara Lubich]. That time we were all together in a bus; we all chatted. One time I was speaking with a bishop from Algeria, who told me that the Muslims had killed his predecessor. I joked a little with him as I said, “*I’m looking at a future martyr.*” There were a lot of different situations, and I learned a lot from them. None of this speaks to the expertise of the interventions of many cardinals, bishops, superiors general and experts, all of them well prepared. There was an enormous richness in everything, thank God. All the departments of the Curia today have an international stamp on them, because they are composed of members from all over the world, all truly well prepared. I thought a lot about the great opportunity these people have in guiding the Church

## **The Holy Father**

“It seems to me that this Pope, with all his international trips, has given a different look to the Catholic Church. The Holy Father is not Italian; he does not come from a country that is a great power, but from one that, until a few years ago, was under a

Communist regime. All that notwithstanding, he has circled the globe, he has visited many peoples, and he has been the father to everyone, even to people of other religions. This has been a turning point that has given the Catholic Church a wider vision of things, something perceived by many bishops.”

“The Holy Father was always with us during the Synod. We ran to be there on time, and he was always there. He was a great example for everyone. Everyone respects him, because one can see that at times he is suffering. He invited us to eat with him in groups of ten at dinner or at supper. With the little strength he still has, he tries to keep up with each one, and to be close to everyone. This was very moving for me.”

### **Hopes**

“In conclusion, I think I can say that the Church is not without hope, but that it is up to us to carry that hope wherever we go to work, sharing it first of all with our priests, then with our religious, and our lay people, and with those of other faiths, so that this hope will get to everyone.”

(ROBERT STONE, C.M., translator)