

acts

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of the Salesian Society
of St John Bosco**

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VATICAN II — STILL A POWERFUL FORCE AT THE PRESENT DAY

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Vatican City, 8 December 1985

My dear confreres,

I am writing to you from the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops. I am thinking of you, of our family, and of young people.

The Synod has discerned so many rich facets of life, so many lines of action, so many hopes for the future, that I cannot fail to speak of them to you for the benefit of our common sanctification and apostolate.

This time I took part in the synodal meetings in company with the FMA Superior General, Mother Marinella Castagno, and some of our own well-deserving confreres: two Cardinals (Castillo and Obando), three Archbishops (Gottardi, Rivera-Damas and Santos), and one of the experts working with the special Secretary, Fr Luigi Bogliolo. There were eight of us in all! Several times we met together to exchange impressions and assessments and to share the joy of expressing at a highly responsible level of service the great ideal of love for the Church cherished by our father Don Bosco.

Pentecostal atmosphere

The Synodal Fathers detected with joy and gratitude the fresh air of a pentecostal atmosphere due to the special presence of the Spirit of the Lord. It was felt in an intense manner with deep satisfaction and not without an element of surprise. Bishops of so many nations, of different colours, from so many cultural backgrounds and different social, political and pastoral situations, while expressing widely varying (and sometimes conflicting) problems and preoccupations, reached a wonderful convergence on great vital principles and on the basic criteria proposed by Vatican II for our changed times.

The Church is not a widow, making a weary earthly pilgrimage in sorrow and mourning: She is the ever youthful Spouse of the Holy Spirit from whom She receives timely rejuvenation, joy of heart and energy of maternal fertility.

The experience of this synodal atmosphere had the effect of widening our mental horizons and giving us a keener ecclesial awareness; it made for a surer assessment of the more urgent priorities, and for tackling problems with the wisdom of one who starts from the standpoint of concern for the universal Church. It was as though one was looking at man, his problems and his history from an observation point above human level.

For anyone who had been present at the Council itself, this Synod was a genuine and close-packed realization of its pentecostal dimension for the present day: with the same advent perspective; the same committed hope; with the very same feeling of being launched into a previously unknown orbit, with the exciting objective of evangelizing the

newly emerging cultures in humanity's present era.

Some of the great protagonists of the Council, now getting on in years, spoke strongly and lucidly of the prophetic significance of Vatican II, and of its vitality because of the powerful influx of the Holy Spirit in this closing period of the twentieth century: a vitality which is not fenced in by our problems but rises above the human events of a few score of years to show forth today's Church as a treasury of miracles open to present and future horizons, and to invite her members to pass from fear and anxiety to joy and hope.

One of these Council witnesses, Cardinal Marty, was led to exclaim with emotion: "in my old age I entrust the great treasure of Vatican II to those who are younger!"

The Holy Father too recalled that to have taken part in the Council had been an extraordinary grace from God which had made the participants take on a sacred commitment: that of dedicating their lives to making it known and put into practice. And I thought to myself that his pontificate will be characterized precisely by this vast purpose, even though it may not always be well understood.

Twenty years of accelerated history

The Synod was convoked to mark the twentieth anniversary of the ending of Vatican II. Nowadays twenty years are a long time. It is said that time has accelerated to such an extent that five or ten years correspond to a century of times gone by. And so humanity's problems have changed a great deal since the Council. Some would have it that we are

in an entirely new situation, and even awaiting...
Vatican III.

As regards the "new situation" there is a certain amount of truth in this: there are new problems, further progress, the maturing and development of values then only in embryo, different ways of looking at things from an ecclesial point of view, tremendous scientific conquests. But unfortunately there is also a good deal which is superficial: the considering, for instance, of a pentecostal event as though it were a mere human happening. The vision is lacking of what the celebration of an Ecumenical Council means in the course of history; a specific consideration of the eschatological aspect of the Church united in Council is overlooked; the great leap forward made by Vatican II is not sufficiently analysed: it was not merely a short-term event of five years, but rather the courageous launching of the Church into a new orbit, an orbit of great length to be traversed, and one intended to accompany and enlighten man's future starting from the present time.

The Holy Spirit, the creative genius and inexhaustible source of the Church's youth, does not sow seed to let it perish, but cares for it and fosters its growth to full maturity. In the case of a Council it will be only after many decades (and not a bare two) that it will be possible to perceive and appreciate the true value of how great a gift God made to the world in Vatican II.

It became clear during the Synod that the Bishops are unanimously convinced of the fully contemporary nature of Vatican II with the present day, without excluding its human limitations or the innovations subsequently made as a result of pastoral experience and reflection. After twenty years

the “pentecostal” aspect of Vatican II is fully alive and appears as a salvific event still at the sprouting stage, but heading well for a promising growth.

The prophetic ministry of two Popes

In this context it is pleasant to recall the two great Popes who were responsible for the Council: John XXIII who conceived the idea of the Council and began it, and Paul VI who saw it through to an end and then began its practical application.

The pastoral heart of Pope John shines through his famous opening address of 11 October 1962, in which he emphasized the urgency of making a “leap forward” so as to render present and incisive the patrimony of faith at a turning point in history.

The acute discernment of Paul VI, on the other hand, remains for ever engraved in his memorable concluding address of 7 December 1965 on the “humanistic” turning of the Council: the Church (true, and not untrue to herself) turned towards man, in whose countenance must be recognized the face of Christ, Son of the Father and Son of Man; a humanism therefore which becomes christianity: an authentic theocentric christianity, but one which can “make it clear that to know God one must know Man”.

This orbit of Pope John and of Paul VI, which expresses the renewing thrust of the whole Council is what is running through the Church at the present day and will continue to do so tomorrow.

To want to follow a different path, therefore, would be to leave this orbit and show little ecclesial vision. One might say that the two great Popes of Vatican II sum up in their very names the conciliar

merits which characterize them: the name "John" recalls the intimacy of pastoral love, and the name "Paul" brings to mind sharpness of reflection on the truth of salvation and intrepid courage in proclaiming it.

The merit of both is interpreted and continued with vigour and fidelity by their present successor who has made an eloquent combination in the programmatic name of "John-Paul" (composed through the happy intuition of Pope Luciani) of the characteristics of the two great architects and guides of the Council.

We have a Successor of Peter who guides us in the correct orbit, traced out by what the Spirit has said to the Churches.

Why the crisis?

Assessments of the last twenty years have highlighted many positive aspects of growth in the Church. They are well known and I do not intend to list them here. We have lived a progressive experience of them through the General Chapters which enabled us to draw up our renewed Rule of life.

I had the opportunity of making a contribution to the Synod in the name of the Union of Superiors General, for the purpose of making known that we consider the sum of the positive aspects much more significant than the negative ones, though we certainly feel the heavy weight of more than a few problematic elements.¹

¹ cf. AGC, this issue, p. 00.

I think it useful nevertheless, so as to discern where change is needed, to offer for your reflection some negative points mentioned by the Episcopal

Conferences of the five continents.

There was presented in the assembly a panorama intimately linked with the social and cultural vicissitudes of the different countries. Two fundamental observations, on which there was unanimous agreement and which must be kept in mind, are: first, the grave postconciliar problems that the Church has lived through in these twenty years do not derive from the Council, and are in fact so many proofs that the latter was timely and indispensable; and second, that the crisis that has been experienced is not a sign of the twilight of the Church and of its mission (even though it were to involve the decline of western civilization), but on the contrary is the dawn of a new historical beginning.

A listing of the difficulties, setbacks, double-talk, deviations, dangers and other problems that have arisen in these years proved useful to the Synod for a more realistic formulation of proposals for future commitment.

I choose some of the points, which can serve for us too as material for an examination of conscience.

— A superficial knowledge of Vatican II has done harm to its application: a too “journalistic” reading of the Council documents, their use in a reductive manner or out of context, a subjective approach to adapt the text to one’s own mentality (progressive, or diehard conservative) which has resulted in the manipulation of the genuine objective meaning. Basically this implies a subtle lack of conversion of mentality to the precise renewing vision of the Council.

— Certain attitudes of rationalist sufficiency in

various influential people who, although being sympathetic to Vatican II, have obscured its values. Such attitudes can be detected at two levels. The first prescind from "Faith" as regards human future, and in practice identifies Revelation with the signs of the times, forgetting the aspect of mystery and sacrament of the Church. The second prescind from the teaching of the Church and of Tradition in reading the Word of God, without attending to the intimate and indissoluble linkage between Revelation, Tradition, and Magisterium. Such attitudes have led to grave difficulties among the People of God through ideological plagiarism and arbitrary interpretations.

— An inferiority complex in face of the secularizing process has opened the doors to secularism. The values of secularization have been perceived and judged from the aspect of one who wants to appear "up to date"; little by little its authenticity has been distorted and there has been a dangerous levelling down of faith and morals. There has been spiritual obtuseness and lack of courage in discerning the urgent nature of evangelical challenge. This has led to a lowering of christian morality on an ever greater scale; the anxiety about feeling up to date rather than bearing witness to truth; and the loss of the identity of their specific vocations and roles in the case of priests, consecrated persons and the laity.

— Forgetfulness of the fundamental vocation of all men to holiness has weakened the consciousness of its indispensability. In the mystery of the incarnation the Lord has taught that true love is inseparable from kenosis (i.e. from the emptying of oneself). As well as this he proclaimed by his Pass-

over that without the Cross there is no victory over evil. In the last twenty years, in the vicissitudes of the Church's presence in the world, it has been made visibly evident in many nations that the redemptive mission is inseparable from persecution and suffering. Sanctity must be rethought as the objective of all pastoral work: a goal which cannot be reached without a concrete ascetical methodology and a Calvary.

— A loss of the sense of the sacred and of the dense theology of the liturgy has had a negative effect on the true "sacramental" dimension of the Church. This is a grave defect with consequences of two kinds. The first is an obscuring of the expressive character and artistic dignity of symbols, in so far as celebrations have been trivialized, and with them signs, vestments, music and texts; wrongly exploited too has been the delicate nature of the sacred for opening up the spirit to transcendence and to a vital participation in the salvific events of Jesus Christ. Such arbitrary attitudes have compromised the public and official aspect of the liturgy as an action of the whole Church. The second defect is that of giving attention almost exclusively to the external renewal of the symbolic aspect, to the introduction of new signs, to a proper concern for a more objective liturgical inculturation, to the improvement of ritual components, as though everything consisted in these alone. Unfortunately the indispensable priority has not always been given to the aspect of introduction to mystery (= *mistagogy*) which is proper to the liturgy, to its sense of adoration, to the reactualization of the sacrifice of the Cross, to the unique character of the priesthood of Christ who, now risen again, is pre-

sent in the celebration through men, rites and things, and who now carries out personally true mediation between God and man. All this carries with it the grave danger of leaving mystery on the margin, of presenting a Church emptied of Christ, of reducing the Eucharist to a symbolic banquet of simple human brotherhood.

The consideration of these negative aspects are enough by themselves to make us feel a call to return to Vatican II with greater attention and fidelity, looking upon its content as a prophetic light given to the Church, precisely for this time of transformation which will be long. To provide a positive reaction to the unfortunate happenings of the past twenty years, the Synod invites us to dust off the Council documents and read them once again in the organic unity of their overall significance.

Relaunching the Council

There were three complementary aspects to the work of the Synod: it recalled to mind the event of the Council itself; it carried out an evaluation of the positive and negative elements that had come to light in these twenty years; and there was the noble and well-defined proposal to relaunch a more practical awareness of the Council's content. The Bishops propose to us new objectives to reach as a further and growing realization of the Council.

After these twenty years a new season is opening, one which is less stormy and more favourable. The promulgation of the new Code of Canon Law is itself an indication of greater clarity and more concrete practical guidelines.

The Code ensures a wise methodology; it de-

mands a certain Discipline (with a capital letter so as not to distort the deep pastoral significance); it overturns to some extent the preceptive canonical nature of the earlier Code; it appears as a normative guide permeated by the ecclesiology of Vatican II.

But the practical relaunching of the Council implies a prerequisite condition: study of the texts and a deep assimilation of the Council. Study of the documents must be systematic and not of pieces taken from here and there at random; it should be based on the fundamental principles of the four Constitutions; and it is indispensable that the "letter" be never separated from the "spirit".

The "spirit" of the Council is of wider amplitude and more incisive than the material significance of the texts; but it is neither an arbitrary interpretation nor a subjective futurist vision. It consists in an overall orientation, in a pastoral sensitivity which proceeds objectively from the various components belonging to the conciliar event (even to a wider extent than from the texts themselves); but it must nevertheless be deducible from the letter of the documents, and so it must be said that one cannot speak of the "spirit" without underlying support in the "letter". As Cardinal Danneels said: "The assertions in the text are to be read in the spirit of the Council; but this spirit cannot be perceived without a careful reading of the texts. In other words, there must be neither a merely legalistic interpretation, nor a vague appeal to a spirit to be superimposed on it so as to wring out the genuine meaning".

The Synod expressed the hope that the Apostolic See would promote, for the use of all the particular Churches, a "Compendium of synthetic state-

ments of Catholic doctrine” (about faith and morals) to serve as a basis for all other catechisms for the faithful. Insistently it recommended that care be taken in the matter of formation of candidates for the ministries so that they acquire a doctrinal mentality explicitly in harmony with the conciliar principles. It insisted on the responsibility of the Bishops as authentic teachers of the faith. It reminded theologians of their duty to deepen their study and to expound the doctrine “of the Church”, and not theories which weaken its patrimony and prescind from its teaching function. It reminded everyone that in the Council itself was witnessed a wonderful communion among all its members (Fathers of different mentalities, and expert theologians of various schools of thought) which made freedom converge in unity and allowed unity to be expressed in a lawful pluriformity.

In the Synod it was also recalled, quoting the famous expression of a certain philosopher, that just as God did not create the best world possible, so we must not think that Vatican II is the best Council possible and already foresaw the signs of the times that would become evident in the future. It is a clear and accepted fact that it had its limits of various kinds. What in fact the Synod was asserting was that innovations appearing in later years find in the Council evangelical criteria for their discernment which still preserve their prophetic timeliness at the present day and are fully modern. It is a question of its pastoral outlook, an expression of wisdom at this epoch-making turning point.

“Pastoral” originality

Vatican II has restored depth, fresh originality, realism of historical dialogue, search for harmonious interdisciplinary relationships, and a concern about methodological capacity in the “pastoral” dimension of the teaching of the Church, “whose character”, said Pope John, “is pre-eminently pastoral”.

The importance of this aspect of the teaching role and of the presentation of the doctrine of faith was recalled more than once during the Synod.

Such insistent emphasis upended a too static and abstract manner of considering the truths of faith and provoked a qualitative leap in the efforts of theologians, perhaps also with some dangerous exaggerations by excess or defect, but all directed to the giving of greater emphasis to the salvific character of revealed truth.

“*Gaudium et Spes*” is called a “pastoral constitution”, because “while resting on doctrinal principles it seeks to set forth the relation of the Church to the world and to the men of today”.² It is not the text of this Constitution alone, but rather the whole Council that rediscovered the originality of the pastoral character. Let us read once again the clear assertion of Pope John in defining the scope of Vatican II: “Our duty is not only to guard this precious treasure (of Catholic doctrine), as if we were concerned only with antiquity, but to dedicate ourselves with an earnest will and without fear to that work which our era demands of us: ...the christian, Catholic and apostolic spirit of the whole world expects *a step forward* towards a doctrinal penetration and a formation of consciousness in faithful and perfect conformity to the authentic doctrine

² cf. GS, note 1

which, however, should be studied and *expounded through the methods of research and through the literary forms of modern thought*. The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another. And it is the latter that must be taken into great consideration with patience if necessary, everything being measured in the forms and proportions of a magisterium which is predominantly pastoral in character".³

³ Address of 11
October 1962

In this there is a very courageous vision of a concrete and delicate renewal.

There is no insinuation of any disagreement or difference of level between "doctrine" and "pastoral" aspects, as though the one tended to exclude the other; what is affirmed rather is a mutual and complementary interaction, on account of which doctrine must be presented as the actual saving truth, and the pastoral application as an approach to the world and a dialogue with man: a dialogue which must not be superficial or sentimental but given substance by doctrine and dogmatic strength. The pastoral originality proclaimed by the Council not only does not prescind from dogma but expresses its true significance, confirming its indispensable nature and its incidence in life. Dogma in fact, precisely because it is the truth of a salvific event, must be understood and loved also by present-day man: it is a gift of God specifically for him. A doctrine developed without a pastoral perspective would betray its own nature of truth for man and its necessity for his salvation.

On the other hand, pastoral applications do not change dogma and still less do they prescind from it; they continually feed on it, they contemplate and assimilate it, they rejuvenate it. The basic intention

of Vatican II was precisely this: to take another look at the doctrinal deposit of the Church so as to rethink from a pastoral point of view the truths of salvation at this cultural turning point which calls for a new evangelization.

Such original aspects render the whole Council particularly up to date; they do not present it as merely defining orthodoxy, but rather as an extraordinary means of dialogue and prophecy. It is the great gift of the Holy Spirit to our century, presenting the doctrine of faith in a new and more useful form to a world in evolution; it reposes the integrity of the Catholic deposit, reclothing it with novel and incisive characteristics; it does not define this or that truth, but seeks a method for presenting to the man of the present day the whole of the patrimony of faith. The Council made no new dogmatic definition, nor did it condemn any new error.

As was said so wisely by Cardinal Garrone, the Council brought out the most genuine characteristic of the christian faith, that of presenting itself with a constant element of novelty: "nihil novi et omnia nova" (everything is new, even though the Council made no new definition!)

This is the great renewal proclaimed by the "pastoral" character of Vatican II.

This aspect has some important consequences for us. Our vocation is one totally permeated by pastoral charity, which makes us evangelizers of the young in the field of education.

Education forms part of the vast world of culture where, unfortunately, there is at the present day a serious break and separation from the Gospel. Education demands of its very nature a fair number of pedagogical qualifications and a constant and intelligent attention to the evolution of

culture. But if we want to educate by evangelizing, or in other words through "pastoral" work, we must also meet the multiple demands of a "new" evangelization. Such demands are in fact indicated by Vatican II which looks forward to pastoral activity made up of precision in faith, security and fidelity of doctrine, awareness of the present-day situation, a sense of dialogue and skill in communication.

Centrality of the "Mystery"

The first and deepest concern of the Synod was to give absolute priority to the conciliar vision of the Church as "mystery".

In the last twenty years some ideological interpretations have flourished, together with certain superficial and popular attitudes which have pretended in one way or another to supplant the genuine nature and historical mission of the Church as the People of God. The Synod heard evidence from zones afflicted by secularization, from continents where the process of liberation is the great concern, and from regions more sensitive to the process of inculturation.

Seen as a really grave danger was the presentation of the Church as though emptied of the mystery of Christ, the living centre in which shines and whence is diffused the fullness of love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Christ is the true light of the nations ("Lumen gentium"!); his Passover stands at the centre of the liturgy celebrated by the pilgrim Church in history to grow as his Body; his incarnation binds the divine and human in intimate and definitive fashion.

The priority of the mystery, thus strongly reaffirmed, did not lead the Synod to give preference to a vertical transcendence to the detriment of the line of the Council which celebrates the presence and service of the Church in the world. Quite the contrary! In fact the deeper consideration of the mystery of Christ demands a still clearer and more generous concern of the Church for man, his needs, his difficulties, his depressing experiences and his anxieties. But the mystery requires a kind of presence and a missionary method, which is not to be confused with historical plans of thinkers and politicians, nor put forward as an immanent alternative to any human activity or profession (neither cultural, nor economic nor political). It is not a question of a simply temporal mission, with only a horizontal perspective; it is rather a case of a most original "pastoral" insertion, which is an initiative of God for the overall salvation of man.

The more the Church is concerned about man, the more she must act according to the peculiar mission which flows from her pastoral charity.

The decisive turning towards man carries with it the complex problems of the incarnation which could even give rise to deviations. Hence the indispensable daily care which the faithful must take of the pastoral identity strictly consistent with an action of the Church.

Guarding the identity

To ensure this verification and grow constantly in it, it is indispensable to drink frequently from the source of the mystery. There are two channels for this purpose: the Word of God and the Liturgy.

Hence the importance of being an assiduous listener, especially to the Word of God according to the conciliar indications given in "Dei Verbum" concerning divine revelation and its transmission through the centuries. To this Word is due the "obedience of faith".⁴

⁴ cf. Rom 16,26

Here should be remembered the fundamental importance of Tradition and the indispensable role of the Magisterium given as a gift by Christ to his Church to ensure the authentic nature of her interpretation: not above the Word itself, but at its service. "It is clear therefore", says the Council, "that in the supremely wise arrangement of God, sacred Tradition, sacred Scripture and the Magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others. Working together, each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit, they all contribute effectively to the salvation of souls".⁵

⁵ DV 10

With regard to the Liturgy, it has to be said that the Eucharist is its supreme expression. Every day it generates the Church as the Body of Christ in history. It is the inexhaustible source of authentic pastoral charity.

In addition the sacrament of Penance represents the constant effort at rectification and conversion. It is not possible to preserve the christian identity, grow in it, and carry out genuinely pastoral activity in the world without temporal distortions, unless there is a constant comparison with Christ in a personal participation in the sacrament of conversion and reconciliation.

Unless there is this constant approach to the sources of the Word of God and the Liturgy one grows weary and the originality proper to the mis-

sion of the Church becomes too easily warped and twisted.

Not without reason has the Synod put as the heading of both its "Message" and its "Final Report": "The Church, under the guidance of the Word of God and with the celebration of the mysteries of Christ, inserts herself into the world to save it."

Commitment to sanctity

The importance given by the Synod to the "mystery" of the Church automatically required greater attention to the "sacramental" nature of the Church itself: the mystery becomes a sacrament in the People of God, in each one of us. In the daily events of our daily life we must give expression to the riches of the love of charity which Christ brought to the world. The celebration of the seven sacraments and of all the liturgy must transform us into "sacraments of salvation" for all men. What Christ is for the world, all his disciples must be in the daily life of each one.

This is why the Synod has made so urgently a strong appeal for holiness: the mystery must become sacrament in the holiness of christians. There is a great need to salvage the concept of sanctity or holiness, bringing it back into the events of every day. The concrete significance of Baptism as a call to sanctity for all men needs clarification;⁶ holiness should be considered as something normal for christians, rather than as a heroic exception.

At the present time the application of Vatican II calls vehemently for an authentic commitment to sanctity; the world needs witness to the saving pres-

⁶ LG chap. 5

ence of God, to the fact that there is no substitute for the sacred, to the central position of adoration and the contemplative dimension, to the need of prayer, to the importance of conversion and penance, to the values of self-donation and sacrifice, to the ideals of charity and justice, to divine transcendence in one's daily human tasks, to the inseparability of the mystery of the cross from the creation and incarnation.

This burning appeal to holiness in daily life, which is the vocation and task of all the faithful, has need of models: the classical ones of yesterday and the living ones of today.

The figures of Mary, of the Apostles, the Martyrs, Virgins and Confessors in different states of life, must be looked at again as models of conduct for the present day. In difficult times, in periods of change and transformation and in view of the future to be built, it is more to the point for christians to be able to bear witness to a sanctity for the new times than to get involved in short-lived enthusiasm for temporal fashions and projects.

In this regard the Synod gives particular emphasis to the urgent role which must be played by members of Institutes of consecrated life. All the People of God expect to see clearly in them, without any secular watering down, "outstanding and striking testimony that the world cannot be transfigured and offered to God without the spirit of the beatitudes".⁷

⁷ LG 31

We must accept, dear confreres, this appeal of the Synod, remembering that the proclamation of the beatitudes is "a special mission of Religious in the Church of the present day", as an invitation to bear sincere and courageous public witness (without any half-measures) to the gospel plan we have

professed as Salesians of Don Bosco.

We already know, clearly and with certainty, what the Church asks of us today. The Spirit of God, who has given to our period in history the precious gift of the Council and who has visited us and been with us during the intense work of the last three General Chapters, asks us through this Extraordinary Synod to dedicate ourselves with all our strength to the daily living out of what we have promised. Let us read carefully once again the circular letter on "Don Bosco, Saint", written to commemorate the golden jubilee of his canonization.⁸ It will do us good.

⁸ AGC 310 Oct-Dec.
1983

The Church gives us the clear indication that this is the path we must follow: there is no other way for us.

I am deeply convinced that only if we dedicate ourselves sincerely and constantly to such a task will the charism of Don Bosco make sense for young people at the present day. I often thought during the Synod that the only way for us to open true and fruitful horizons for our vocation is by remaining loyal to the Church on this point.

Communion and pluriformity

In exploring the mystery of the Church, the Synod attributed central and fundamental importance to the reality of "communion", a theme derived from the mystery of the Trinity and from the ecclesial doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ. Although communion carries with it institutional aspects and human organizational criteria, it is not primarily the task of sociology but more properly that of theology to indicate its various contents and

determine its precise consequences. It was along this line that was examined the peculiar and non-typical manner in which collegiality is practised in the Church, its projection into Bishops' Conferences, the criteria of participation, of shared responsibility, of decentralization and subsidiarity. In a comparison of the universal Church with particular Churches the theological principle was picked out and clarified of the variety and pluriformity in communion in the one Church of Christ, without running the risk of a disruptive pluralism.

This point is worth emphasizing, because in it is reflected (albeit only partially and analogically) the decentralized and pluriform life of our Congregation, present now in the various cultures of the different continents.

The approach to a consideration of the relationships between the particular Churches and the universal Church is from the aspect of the unity of the mystery present in the Catholic Church: one only Christ, a single Spirit, one Baptism, one Eucharist, a single College of Bishops in hierarchical communion with the Pope. But this unity is lived in a pluriformity of charismata, in a diversity of ministries, in a multiplicity of persons, in the variety of places where communities celebrate the liturgy, in the pastoral differences between the different ways in which individual Bishops guide communities of widely varying cultures.

A measure of the authenticity of a particular Church can be found in the values of unity proper to the universal Church: "The one universal Church is truly present in all the particular Churches", says the synodal text, "and the latter are formed according to the image of the universal Church, in such a way that the Catholic Church,

⁹ Final Report, II, C,
2

which is one and unique, exists in the particular Churches and starts from them".⁹

Ecclesial pluriformity, a sign of a rich vitality, is built on values of unity and uniqueness proper to the ministry of Christ present in the Catholic Church, founded on the ministry of Christ and the Apostles.

Pluralism, on the other hand, starts from an opposite point of view (i.e. from the particular to the universal), and carries with it the danger of distortions, separations, provincialism and nationalism even to the extent of schism. The centrifugal aspect of pluralism would start from cultural differences and use them as a yardstick for adapting the values of unity present in the universal Church, even to the extent of changing their content.

From the indispensable process of "inculturation" must be excluded both a simple adaptation to the world, as though the signs of the times coincided with Revelation, and a diehard unchanging conformity as though the deposit of faith were identified with the cultural form in which it had been expressed up to now. In pastoral activity the Church seeks always a communion which is living and faithful, remaining open to all human values, so as to assume them and defend them in every nation.

In the ecclesial communion the ministerial and charismatic differences do not indicate a greater or less degree of dignity, but rather a particular and demanding function of service and witness; and the differences in form and rites strengthen and embellish unity by the variety and multiple contributions of human cultures, understood as the harmonious gathering of peoples in the one Family of God.

At this turning point in the history of humanity,

the great challenge for the inculturation of the faith, is to be able to penetrate the vital cultural nuclei starting from the unity of the Gospel, and bearing in mind the accelerated pace of history; they foster the “emergence of an immense series of new problems, calling for a new endeavour of analysis and synthesis”.¹⁰

¹⁰ GS 5

More urgent than ever is the pastoral creativity of a “new evangelization”, able to overcome the growing distances between human civilization and christian faith, impregnating all cultures with the Gospel, without becoming a slave to any of them.¹¹

¹¹ cf. EN 20

In the light of these criteria of the Council recalled by the Synod, we can better understand and put into practice what our own Constitutions tell us: “The principle of unity in the Congregation is the charism of our Founder, which of its richness gives rise to different ways of living the one salesian vocation. Formation is therefore one in its essential content and diversified in its concrete expressions; it accepts and develops whatever is true, noble and just in the various cultures”.¹²

¹² C 100

A gift for the young

Young people were strongly present to the Synod, not only for the interest they showed in it and on account of the long and moving prayer vigils in which they took part for the happy outcome of this ecclesial event, but also because frequently the Synod members and the Holy Father himself referred to them as the best bearers of the grace of Vatican II towards the third millennium.

In his intervention in the assembly, Cardinal Edward Pironio noted the happy coincidence of the

Synod with the International Youth Year. The Synod therefore had perforce to direct its gaze by preference to the young. They are the principal protagonists, said the Cardinal, of the desired construction of the new civilization of truth and love.

Some of the Bishops pointed out that in various regions there are young people who do not know the Church and are not attracted to it because it does not appear to them as the "Body of Christ": they have a liking for Jesus as though in opposition to the Church. In very many regions there is the grave danger of an insufficient evangelization of the new generations; and yet youth forms the great numerical majority among many peoples.

It was also noted that spiritual and apostolic movements have arisen which have in fact attracted young people and that, if these are properly inserted into the pastoral activity of the particular Churches, they open up new horizons of hope.

In its concluding document the Synod explicitly asserts: "The Council considers youth as the hope of the Church (cf. GE 2). This Synod turns to them with predilection and great trust; it expects much from their generous dedication; it exhorts them with great intensity to play an active part in the Church's mission, assuming and promoting with industrious energy the Council's legacy".¹³

There, dear confreres, you have an appeal of the Synod which we must consider addressed in a particular way to us who are called to be "missionaries of the young". We feel ourselves challenged to become valid transmitters of the Council's riches to today's youth.

Let us widen our pastoral horizons and direct the attention and ideals of the young towards the great themes of Vatican II, as they have been re-

¹³ Final Report, II, C,
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launched by the Synod. We must first understand and deepen our knowledge of the pentecostal significance of the Council, so as to transmit it to them: this is the great orbit in which the Church must move in the next decades. At the dawn of a new historical era, the Council is the great prophecy of the Church which, in the Spirit, becomes the Mother and Mistress of a new evangelization for humanity. These are not just so many high-sounding words, but the great "grace" given by the Lord to our century for a new christian beginning.

If Don Bosco were among us today he would feel great joy, and would concentrate all his pastoral charity, his pedagogical brilliance and his tireless spirit of initiative in this great ecclesial enterprise among young people. We are the heirs of his mission. Let us set to work with goodwill to carry it out.

We recall the words of the ancient prophet: "He (the Lord) gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint".¹⁴

¹⁴ Is 40,29-31

— I want to conclude these reflections by turning our minds and hearts to Mary Help of Christians, Mother of the Church.

Vatican II ended on 8 December, Feast of the Immaculate Conception; this extraordinary Synod ended on the same day, and the day moreover when we call to mind the first anniversary of the promulgation of our Constitutions, renewed according to the mind of Vatican II.

8 December is a memorable date as regards both the beginning of our mission and so many other initiatives and gifts for our Family.

May this letter which has been put together and written in the climate of the Feast of the Immacolata serve to emphasize for all of us the Marian aspect of both the Council and this Synod; may it help us to see in the respective documents an appeal of Mary, Spouse of the Holy Spirit and Queen of the Apostles, who invites us to relaunch after the mind of the Council the charisma of Don Bosco among the youth of today, in a Church which, in the light of the Word of God and by celebrating the mysteries of Christ, inserts itself in the world to save it.

Let us repeat with the Pope the beautiful prayer he recited on 8th December of this year in the Piazza di Spagna: "To you, O Mother, we confide with great trust the fruits and results of the Synod! Through your intercession render its message efficacious for souls, so that its aims may be realized and the conciliar renewal may be rediscovered with loyalty, explored with fidelity, realized with courage, presented and diffused with enthusiasm and credibility".¹⁵

May this prayer, dear confreres, be translated into action through all of us: the young are expecting from us the gift of the Council!

Cordial greetings and best wishes to you all.

Affectionately in Don Bosco,

Don F. Viganò

¹⁵ Oss. Rom. (English edtn) 17 Dec. 1985