

The Seed Germinates

Sixteenth General Congregation of the Synod

IN A FEW days' time, we shall go home for eleven months. This will apparently be a time of empty waiting. But it will probably be the most fertile time of the whole Synod, the time of germination. As Jesus said:

'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, yet he does not know how'.

We have listened to hundreds of thousands of words during these last three weeks. Sometimes we have thought: 'Too many words!' Most of these words have been positive, words of hope and aspiration. These are words sown in the soil of the Church. They will be at work in our lives, in our imagination and our subconscious, during these eleven months. When the moment is right, they will bear fruit.

The Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote:

In spite of all the farmer's work and worry, He can't reach down to where the seed is slowly 'Transmuted into summer'.
The earth bestows.'

Although nothing may appear to be happening, we can be confident that if our words are loving they will bud,

flower in the lives of people who we do not know. As St Thérèse of Lisieux said, quoted recently by the Holy Father:

'C'est la confiance et rien que la confiance qui doit nous conduire à l'Amour.''

It is confidence and nothing but confidence that must lead us to Love.'²

These eleven months will be like a pregnancy. Abraham and Sarah are promised they will have descendants more numerous than the sand on the seashore. But nothing appears to happen. Sarah laughs when she hears this promise the third or fourth time, as she listens hidden in the tent to the strangers in Genesis 18. Probably a bitter-sweet laugh. She has heard it all before, and she remains barren. But in a year's time she will bear a child of laughter.

So we, my sisters, and my brothers, we are pregnant with new life. If you will forgive me, this reminds me of the first time I ever tried to make a speech in Spanish, in Latin America. A bishop got confused—which is very rare. He thought I was an Irish Franciscan instead of an English Dominican. I explained, he blushed, and I said, 'El obispo esta embarazado'. I meant to say 'the bishop is embarrassed'. Unfortunately, it meant: 'The bishop is pregnant.'

This is a time of active waiting. Let me repeat the words of Simone Weil I quoted during the retreat.

'We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them...This way of waiting, looking

is, in the first place, attentive. The soul empties itself of its own contents in order to receive the human being it is looking at, just as he or she is, in all their truth.’³

This is profoundly countercultural. The global culture of our time is often polarised, aggressive, dismissive of other people’s views. The cry is: On whose side are you? When we go home, people will ask, ‘Did you fight for our side? Did you oppose those unenlightened other people?’

We shall need be profoundly prayerful to resist the temptation to succumb to a party-political way of thinking. That would be to fall back into the sterile, barren language of much of our conflictual society. It is not the synodal way. The synodal process is organic and ecological rather than competitive. It is more like planting a tree than winning a battle. Sometimes battles are unavoidable. Think of Saint Athanasius. But as such will be hard for many to understand what we are doing, sometimes including ourselves! But if we keep our minds and our hearts open to the people whom we have met here, vulnerable to their hopes and fears, their words will germinate in

our lives, and ours in theirs. And there will an abundant harvest, a fuller truth, the Church will be renewed.

Humanity’s first vocation in Paradise was to be gardeners. Adam tended creation, speaking God’s creative words, naming the animals. We shall have some gardening to do in these eleven months, my brothers and sisters to nurture the tender plant that is the Synod. Will we speak fertile, hope-filled words, or words that are destructive and cynical? Will our words nurture the crop or be poisonous? Will we be the gardeners of the future or trapped in old sterile conflicts? We each choose.

St Paul said to the Ephesians:

‘Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.’ (4.9)

[1] *The Sonnets to Orpheus XII*, in *Selected Poems with Parallel German Text*, trans. Susan Ranson and Marielle Sutherland (Oxford, 2011), p.195

[2] https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231015-santateresa-delbambinogesuh.html#_ftn1

[3] *Waiting on God*, trans Emma Crauford, London 1959, p.169.