

**INTERVENTION OF THE HOLY FATHER FRANCIS  
AT THE 18TH GENERAL CONGREGATION OF THE 16th  
ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS**

Paul VI Audience Hall  
Wednesday, 25 October 2023

I like to think about the Church as the faithful people of God, saints and sinners, a people convoked and called with the power of the beatitudes and of Matthew 25.

Jesus did not choose any political models of his time for his Church: neither Pharisee, nor Sadducee, nor Essene, nor Zealot. No “closed corporation”; he simply assumes the tradition of Israel: “you will be my people and I will be your God”.

I like to think of the Church as this simple and humble people walking in the Lord’s presence (the faithful people of God). This is the religious sense of our faithful people. And I say faithful people so as not to fall into the many ideological perspectives and models with which the reality of the people of God is “reduced”. Simply the faithful people, or also, “the holy, faithful people of God” on a journey, saint and sinner. And this is the Church.

One of the characteristics of this faithful people is its infallibility; yes, it is infallible *in credendo* [in belief]. (*In credendo falli nequit*, says LG 12). *Infallibilitas in credendo*. [Infallible in belief.] And I explain it like this: “when you want to know what Holy Mother Church believes, go to the Magisterium because its task is to teach it to you. But when you want to know how the Church believes, go to the faithful people”.

An image comes to mind: the faithful people united at the entrance of the Cathedral of Ephesus. History says (or legend) that the people were on both sides of the street leading to the Cathedral while the Bishops entered in procession, repeating in chorus: “Mother of God”, asking the Hierarchy to declare as dogma this truth that they already possessed as the people of God. (Some say they had sticks in their hands and were showing them to the Bishops). I don’t know if this is history or legend, but the image is valid.

The faithful people, the holy, faithful people of God, has a soul, and because we can speak of the soul of the people we can speak of a hermeneutic, of a way of seeing reality, of a consciousness. Our faithful people are conscious of their dignity, they baptize their children, they bury their dead.

The members of the Hierarchy come from this people, and we have received the faith from this people, generally from our mothers and grandmothers — “your mother and your grandmother” Paul says to Timothy — a faith transmitted in a feminine dialect, like the Mother of the Maccabees who spoke to them “in the dialect” of her children. And here, I would like to underline that, in the holy, faithful people of God, the faith is transmitted in dialect, and generally in a feminine dialect. This is so not only because the Church is Mother, and it is precisely women who best reflect her (the Church is woman), but because it is women who know how to wait, who know how to discover the resources of the Church, of the faithful people, who risk beyond what is possible, perhaps fearfully but courageously, and in the light and shade of a dawning day, they approach a tomb with the intuition (not yet hope) that there might be some life.

The women of the holy faithful people of God are a reflection of the Church. The Church is feminine, she is bride, she is mother.

When ministers go too far in their service and mistreat the people of God, they disfigure the face of the Church with machismo and dictatorial attitudes (it is enough to recall Sister Liliana Franco's intervention). It is painful to see a "price list" for sacramental services, in some parish offices, just like in a supermarket. Either the Church is the faithful people of God on a journey, saints and sinners, or she ends up being a business offering a variety of services. And when pastoral ministers take this second path, the Church becomes a supermarket of salvation, and priests, mere employees of a multinational company. This is the great defeat to which clericalism leads us — with great sorrow and scandal (it is enough to go into the ecclesiastical tailor shops in Rome to see the scandal of young priests trying on cassocks and hats, or albs and lace robes).

Clericalism is a scourge, it is a blow. It is a form of worldliness that defiles and damages the face of the Lord's bride; it enslaves the holy, faithful people of God.

And the people of God, the holy, faithful people of God, go forward patiently and humbly, enduring the scorn, mistreatment and marginalization of institutionalized clericalism. How naturally we speak of the princes of the Church, or of episcopal promotions as getting ahead career-wise! The horrors of the world, the worldliness that mistreats God's holy and faithful people.

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