

The Church We Long For

Open Letter to Pope Francis

This letter is motivated by the crisis which currently besets our Church and very especially because of our failure to attract the younger generations with the message of Christ. We agree with Pope Francis that we must not get bogged down in the quicksand of desolation, protest and simple complaining, but rather it is time to make constructive suggestions as to what needs to be done. This letter, thus, is a response to his invitation to have the courage to tell him “ this is the path to be taken, this is not”. We trust that the letter and its suggestions contribute to the needed reorientation in the course of the Church.

Preamble: a confession of faith

Much as we take pride in Francis of Assisi, Thomas More and Mother Teresa – though we ourselves are far from their mark, we feel ashamed by the likes of Maciel and the many pedophiles, not to mention the cover ups of the hierarchy. We are overwrought by the thought that as a result of such reprehensible behavior, millions of people will be distancing themselves from the faith. Sadly, history shows that much as the rest of us, the Church has a dark side. Together with the holy and the sacred, there coexists in it the abuse of power, arrogance, hypocrisy, dogmatism – all the worse when it is clothed in virtue.

Despite the above, we love the Church and recognize that what we most cherish came to us by means of it. She:

- Introduced us to Christ and His message
- inflamed us with the noblest ideals, centered on love
- awakened our sensitivity for the sacred and transcendent
- showed us that we are part of a community, one for others
- encouraged us to build the kingdom, what gives meaning to our lives

Hence – despite the falls and weaknesses of Peter and his successors – Christ found his Church with the mandate to evangelize the 4 corners of the earth. Indeed, without the institutional Church, and despite her many failings, the faith could not have been transmitted from generation to generation and onto the present.

Be that as it may, however important be the Church, Jesus Christ is the end. The Church is but a means to that end. It serves only to the extent it draw us to Him, His witness and His message. Hence, the current crisis is doubly serious especially for those who, inadvertently, placed their faith in the Church and its authorities rather than on the person of Christ.

Nevertheless, we trust that this crisis and the needed renovation will purify our faith. And one must recognize that together with the many failings, there also are signs which give rise to hope, such as: the emergence of base communities in the parishes, where people gather together to deepen their faith beyond the weekly Mass. So too there is a growing number of lay movements, where the laity can live their faith more intensely, each according to his own charisma (for example, the Charismatics, Catechumens, Communion and Liberation, Christian Life Communities, Focolares, Opus Dei, Schoenstatt, Spiritual Family of Charles de Foucauld...).

The most important sign, however, is the evolution of the Church's teaching concerning the relationship between the temporal and the supernatural. For centuries the traditional view was that the religious was the more perfect state, inasmuch as it centered on the most important and transcendent, the union with God, whereas the laity focused on the secondary and passing, the things of this world.

Happily, the Church's meditation on the message of Christ has matured, concluding that the Kingdom of God is not about the world to come, but rather begins with the Incarnation, here and now. All of us, His followers, are called to build the kingdom not just a select few. Indeed we shall be judged on how much we contributed to the founding of a civilization based on love and fraternity, the privileged task of the laity.

To be sure, our Protestant brethren were the first to develop this idea – some 500 years ago. But seeds of this form of thinking can also be found, in the same period, in the vocation of service preached by Ignatius of Loyola and his spiritual exercises. In the 20th century this vocation of service has been a central charisma of numerous lay movements. The 2d Vatican Council made this fully explicit for the universal church.

Constructive proposals

We hunger and long for a Church:

1. centered on Jesus and His project;
2. that practices and symbolizes what it preaches;
3. which is evangelical and missionary
4. whose doctrinal magisterium focus on the essential;
5. whose moral teaching distinguish the ideal from minimum moral norms;
6. whose institutional structure cohere with His message.

To be sure, we realize that the Church will never be perfect, for it is made up of weak and sinful humans, with feet of clay.

1. A Church centered on Jesus and His project

In the past, faith was imposed by the ruling civil authority. Once monarchs were Christian, this favored a culture and institutions amenable to the diffusion of Christianity. Such a culture spread Christianity to the masses, but at the expense of sacrificing its depth and intensity.

Today there is no longer a dominant culture. Multiple sub-cultures and beliefs co-exist. Hence, **faith is increasingly a matter of conviction (not inherited), the result of a personal encounter with Jesus, typically mediated by the community of believers and the visible witness of loved or admired ones.**

In order to provoke this encounter, evangelization need translate the message of Jesus to the needs of the man and woman of today. Notwithstanding all of the progress society has made, there still remain the perennial concerns: what makes for a fulfilled life? Is there no more to life, no more meaning, than simply maximizing the pleasure of the moment? On the basis of what ideals and values should I live my life? Jesus' message addresses such concerns. To be sure, **Christianity is not the only cosmovision present in the public square, but we doubt that there be**

another with greater appeal to move humans than the Sermon on the Mount, nor a project for life more meaningful than that of loving God above all things and one's neighbor as oneself.

Moreover, what greater source of security and happiness can one find than to rest in the arms of a good and compassionate Father. And what makes Jesus' message all the more credible is that he practiced what he preached right down to his death on the cross. This makes His appeal all the greater in an age such as ours, suspicious of institutions, and hungry for lived examples.

2. A Church that practices and symbolizes what it preaches

Credibility has long required that one practice what one preaches. Jesus himself urged us to follow the teachings of the doctors of the law, but not to imitate their behavior. Our age is especially sensitive to incoherence and hypocrisy.

We believe that much of Pope Francis' popularity stems from his sensitivity to symbols. Rather than living in the outsized and luxurious apartments reserved for the Pope in the Vatican, he has chosen to live in a boarding house for visiting priests. Rather than getting around in a limousine, he uses an economy model. He calls himself simply Bishop of Rome and as such he visits his parishioners periodically. Not only does he bless the crowds, but he asks for their prayers. His style, in keeping with the simplicity of Jesus' message, lends credibility to his discourse, and so makes him appealing to believers and nonbelievers alike.

Sadly, the example of Pope Francis is more the exception than the rule. Too many of the traditional symbols of the Church turn away rather than attract. Jesus taught that whoever desired to be first in the Kingdom be last in honor but first in service. Is it congruent with Jesus' message to use titles in the Church such as *Holy Father*, *Most Reverend*; *Excellency*? Are such titles not completely out of line with simplicity? It might have made sense in an age of monarchs to call Cardinals, Princes of the Church. But today? Indeed the only Prince in the gospels is Satan! And need the Bishop's offices still be called the Episcopal Palace, as still is the case in many countries? We know that good work is done there, but the name Palace suggests power, not service, the essential value of the Church.

Then too many liturgies are pompous, full of incense and archaic vestments, reminiscent of ages gone by, but foreign to today's culture of casualness. For example, to many, miters are not only archaic but laughable. Would Jesus feel comfortable in such liturgies? No doubt He would see the good intention behind them, but certainly such pomposity seems at odds with the simplicity He taught. **Would not symbols more in accord with Jesus' teaching of simplicity and inner purity be more attractive to today's men and women?**

3. A Church which is evangelical and missionary

We are fully aware that to attend simply to the needs of the Catholic community is a full time job. Yet that is not enough. There is the world of nonbelievers. For this reason Pope Francis invites us to leave our comfort zone and our local ghettos and reach out to the community at large. For a Church which does not evangelize is not a church. Indeed, if we are not convinced that nonbelievers do not know what they missing by not knowing and following Jesus, then we should doubt our own faith.

Now that the faith no longer is transmitted culturally, how best to reach out to people in search of transcendence and longing to discover the path to a fulfilled life? One privileged route is through the educational system, especially in countries (as in Chile) where public schools are allowed to provide (elective) courses in religion to all those interested in them. For it is in adolescence that the majority of us decide what we want to do with our lives and by what values and ideals we shall live. Sadly, with few exceptions, religious education is more apt for little children than for maturing youngsters. Its content often borders on the superstitious, discouraging rather than appealing to one's reason. Small wonder that so many adolescents are turned off by it and abandon the faith, considering it pure myth, much as they stop believing in Santa Claus.

For this reason we think it imperative that our best theologians and teachers design modern programs in religion for adolescents, which address their concerns and aspirations, appeal to their intellects and inflame them with Jesus's ideals, life project and example. This will require revamping the training of religion professors, including, if necessary, the training of lay volunteers from other professions (akin to Teach in America).

It goes without saying that even the best of such programs will not guarantee that youth will take the believer's option. Nothing can guarantee that. But at least they will have been exposed and educated to an adult faith, sufficiently attractive so that the seed planted may flower in the future.

4. A Church whose doctrinal magisterium focus on the essential

Matthew 25 tells us that in the Final Judgment those who enter the Kingdom shall be those who gave food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, received the migrant, dressed the naked, visited the sick and imprisoned...". It is clear from this that **what is essential for salvation is orthopraxis not orthodoxy. This implies a reversal of current emphases from purity of doctrine to purity of intention and practice (to be sure, never fully achievable).**

Doctrine matters only insofar as it lead to orthopraxis. What doctrines are important to right behavior is a question open to discussion. But we are persuaded that the set of essential dogmas is much smaller than the many contained in today's catechism. The Creed is possibly a first order approximation (and possibly best) to such a list.

We also consider it paramount that the Church distinguish between doctrines of fundamental importance and the rest. Doctrines of first order importance are those which have proven historically to bring persons closer to Jesus and His message and so can be considered conditions for professing the Catholic faith. Doctrines of lesser importance are those which render more intelligible first order doctrines or help some, if not all, to draw closer to Christ.

Are teachings such as those concerning original sin, atonement, purgatory, indulgences, capital sins, Mariology, the commandments of the Church ... of the same fundamental importance as those concerning the Incarnation and Divinity of Jesus, the Trinity, the Real Presence in the Eucharist, love of God and neighbor, the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting? In short, doctrines of fundamental importance are those which have a basis in scripture and the early Church. If one fails to make such a distinction, one runs the risk of mistaking what is essential for the life of a Christian from that which is not, and hence, creating unnecessary doubts or problems for the faithful.

Might not this distinction between essential and accessory doctrines not serve as well to narrow our differences with our Orthodox and Protestant brethren?

5. A Church whose moral teaching distinguish the ideal from minimum moral norms;

Jesus cannot be accused of laxity. He was demanding, very demanding, beyond the letter of the law. Mere compliance with the letter of the law is not enough, rather what really matters for Jesus is the intention in one's heart. For example, destroying someone's reputation is another form of assassination, much as lusting after a woman can be another form of adultery. Yet, Jesus was demanding but, at the same time, compassionate. It is, of course, the moral behind the parable of the prodigal son. It is what He did when He forgave the adulteress about to be stoned to death. Jesus asks us to go beyond the minimum, beyond the Pharisee who prides himself for complying with the law. Rather, He is compassionate with the fallen, those desirous of forgiveness, as the publican who humbly strikes his breast for his many sins.

The Church must never fail to point us to the ideal which Jesus asks of us. Nevertheless, she must distinguish between the ideal to which Jesus calls us – to aspire to the maximum – and the minimum required of us all as human beings. The Church has made this distinction in many moral issues, such as in our dealings with material possessions. Jesus said it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Indeed, He told the rich man who asked how he could be perfect to sell all that he possessed, give it to the poor and follow Him. The Church has traditionally interpreted this call to evangelical poverty as an ideal to which we all should aspire, but it does not consider the failure to give all as a mortal sin. The person who pays a just wage and earns an income from honest effort is considered decent, for he complies with the minimum (as required by the natural law), even though he fails to live up to the Christian ideal of sharing his wealth with the needy. In much the same vein, Jesus teaches us "to turn the other cheek", an ideal. But the Church asks us, as a minimum, to control our thirst for vengeance and be proportionate in our response.

Yet in other cases the Church has converted the ideal into the minimum required of all. A case in point is marriage - that it last till death do us part. This is what every couple believes and desires when marrying; lovers spontaneously swear their eternal love; the poetry of all ages is an ode to undying love; and Jesus tells us that this was God's intention for marriage, when he asked about Moses's permitting divorce. But is indissolubility the minimum required of all couples, such as it be a mortal sin for those would divorce and remarry? Rather, might it not be that indissolubility is the ideal to which every marriage should aspire, but not the minimum required? It is precisely this distinction between the ideal in marriage and the minimum required which has led our Orthodox and Protestant brethren to permit couples with failed marriages (failed after an honest attempt of salvaging the marriage) to divorce and remarry and stay in communion with the church.

Much the same might be said of sexual relations. Without a doubt the ideal is that these be an expression of love in a stable and permanent relationship (marriage). And most certainly the Church must continue to proclaim this ideal of linking sex to love, all the more so in a society such as ours which tends to reduce sex to mere narcissistic pleasure. Need we not distinguish promiscuous sex, without love, from pre-marital sex, but where sex signifies an expression of love between the two, even though not married?

As in all moral questions, the final word is that of the voice of conscience, of an open and informed conscience, ready to suspect and, if need be, counteract the impulse of desire. In short, we believe that Catholic moral teaching would benefit from a systematic revision of traditional positions in the light of the distinction between the ideal to which aspire and the minimum which is asked of us all.

6. A Church whose institutional structure cohere with His message.

There are many charisms in the Church, all necessary: that of the laity, to build the Kingdom; that of the clergy to celebrate the sacraments, preach and motivate the laity; that of the bishops, to orient and organize evangelization and forge the unity of the Church; that of the Pope, “*primus inter pares*”, to help maintain the unity of the Church.

Unfortunately, in the course of the centuries some of these charisms have been privileged at the expense of others. As a result **today’s Church resembles the structure of a “Prussian army” more than that of a community of believers, with an empowered cusp and a passive and obedient base. The Pope has come to be “the” authority, almost all powerful in matters of doctrine, morality and Church governance; supported by the Curia, an elite, anything but transparent, self satisfied and distant from the faithful.** It is one thing to listen with respect and an open mind to all that the Pope teaches and says, quite another to consider these all dogmas. Indeed most theologians consider that but two dogmas have been defined infallibly by Popes alone, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception and that of the Assumptions (and in both cases it was claimed that the Pope had simply ratified what the faithful had long believed for centuries).

Theologians distinguish between the extraordinary magisterium (that which is infallible) and the ordinary magisterium. The ordinary magisterium is what makes up the day to day of Catholic life, beginning with the catechism, Sunday sermons, letters of the Bishops and of the Pope, declarations of National Episcopal Conference and, indeed, universal Councils, such as Vatican II, which aimed to orient the faithful rather than to “define dogmas”. It is here in the ordinary magisterium that is to be found the accumulated wisdom of the Church over the centuries; but here too are weeds: mistaken theologies, cultural biases, partial viewpoints and error ridden affirmations. Overall the ordinary magisterium is highly beneficial, yet one must not elevate it all to fundamental dogma. Not all of it is of one piece. The infallible magisterium, on the other hand, is that subset of doctrines important and relevant for salvation (although, as we said earlier, only orthopraxis is ultimately essential), which distinguishes Christians from non-Christians and nonbelievers and, secondarily, distinguishes Catholics from the Orthodox and Protestants. The ordinary magisterium is wide ranging. The extraordinary magisterium, based as it is in exceptional pronouncements of Councils and the Pope, is much more reduced, *the exact limits of which are even today a matter open to discussion among theologians.*

We know that Jesus promised to be with His Church to the end of time “so that the gates of hell not prevail over it”. Nevertheless, we consider it an urgent task for theologians to determine with greater precision how far that promise to preserve His church from fundamental and irremediable errors extends. This requires limiting the infallible magisterium to the essentials of Jesus’s message. We consider that the distinction between doctrines of fundamental importance and those of lesser status may offer a promising start to clarifying such limits for the extraordinary magisterium.

However much respect we have for the Pope and his teachings, not all that he or his predecessors says or does is necessarily good or correct. For example, Popes can make and have made poor appointments, all the more so when they have failed to listen to local bishops and the laity. There are some hopeful signs, for example, when Bishop O'Malley of Boston recently reprehended Pope Francis for his sad and impetuous declarations treating as calumny the accusations of sexual abuse and cover up in Chile (which, happily, he shortly corrected, sending a fact finding mission to deal with the issue, and leading to the resignation of the entire Chilean hierarchy). Then too, it is a welcome sign that a local Chilean community refused to accept the papally designated bishop (reputed to have participated in the cover up) and that eventually, the Pope regretted the appointment and had him removed. "Fraternal correction" works in both directions, not just top down (typical up until recently) but bottom up, from the base to higher authority (where much still remains to be done).

If the Papacy has overstretched its role and authority, bishops are too reduced in theirs. The collegiality of bishops need be recognized *institutionally* in today's Church. Their authority can be traced directly to the 12 apostles. They too are bishops, not just the bishop of Rome. Major decisions in matters of faith and morals should be the result of collegial reflection of the bishops in a universal Council, called by the Pope, successor of Peter and bishop of Rome.

As for the laity their role has been completely atrophied as the result of centuries of clericalism, grounded in a theology which was overturned in Vatican II. The Council insisted that the Kingdom of God begins in this world, but that its construction is the responsibility of the People of God. Laity and religious are equally responsible, each according to his charism.

Notwithstanding Vatican II, clericalism prevails in practice – not only among the clergy but among the laity as well. For example in the most recent crisis of sexual abuses and the cover up of the hierarchy (in Chile and elsewhere), the voice of the laity has been sadly missing. We laity have been spectators, shocked to be sure, but asking ourselves 'why has the Church permitted such abuses?' Why doesn't the Pope or the Bishops do something about it? But with few exceptions, the laity simply sat and watched. To be sure, the hierarchy did not ask our help when the crisis exploded. Yet nothing, no one prevented us from speaking out once the crisis emerged. Where is the opinion of the laity. Or rather, where are the opinions of the laity, for surely there must be a great diversity of opinions. If the laity wishes to be heard, first it must speak out. And, to be sure, that voice needs be *institutionalized* in the structure of the Church. In theory, all parishes have lay councils, and we imagine, bishops have lay councils as well. But it seems that they function at the whim of the parish pastor. Should the lay council simply have an advisory function or are their issues where it should have voting power as well? Could it recommend the removal of a pastor or bishop? Should it not be consulted before appointments of one or the other? What role should lay movements play in this?

Moreover, we observe that those who do the most parish work, women, are the ones with minimum participation in Church decisions. It may be too early for some to consider women for the priesthood. Yet all should agree that women should have as prominent participation in Church affairs and leadership as men, ridding the Church of centuries of male dominance and chauvinism.

Finally, a word about the clergy. Our hearts go out to the vast majority of priests and nuns who dedicate themselves anonymously to their apostolate, and who today must bear the cross of

being suspected of abuse and corruption because of the behavior of the few. Our hearts also go out to the single priest in a small town or the lone parish priest in the city, who live a life of sacrifice and in absolute *loneliness*. Yet this second cross is not necessary. **Religious life is sufficiently demanding, almost heroic, to require in addition the emotional and affective loneliness of celibacy. It seems to us that it is time to return to the ancient practice in the West and the continuing historic practice up to the current day of the oriental rite in our own Catholic and apostolic Church under the Pope**, whereby priests, at least diocesan priests can be married. Celibacy, it seems to us, should be required only of monks and those religious orders whose apostolate so require it.

In closing

Without a doubt our letter is incomplete; much needs to be nuanced and some of our affirmations may be altogether mistaken. But even if all that we said were correct and relevant, this letter is not “the” roadmap to renovation but at most a first step in the right direction. We know that others have different ideas of the path to take. We welcome such proposals. We invite those who feel in agreement with the overall thrust of this letter to adhere to it. But as importantly we invite those who do not concur with it to express their opinions publicly. It is time to speak out and act, for as Jesus said “the harvest is abundant, but few are the laborers.” The Church is not just matter of concern for the clergy. It is high time that the laity assume their responsibility as the people of God.

This letter is a minimally modified version (to clarify points specific to Chile) of the letter signed by 52 lay Chileans and sent to Pope Francis in June 2018 by way of Bishop Scicluna with another 250 adherents since then.

Those who agree with the thrust of this letter and wish to adhere to it may do so by sending an e-mail to: cartafrancisco@gmail.com