

## **The Church We Seek: Open Letter to the Pope and the Bishops of Chile**

This letter is born of desolation because of the current crisis that our church is going through and especially because Christ and his gospel are not getting through and calling the new generations. We agreed with Pope Francis not to dwell on the desolation, but to go beyond lament and make some constructive suggestions of where to go. This letter is also a response to his invitation to have the courage to say: "This is the way to go, that is not." We hope that it contributes to the necessary reorientation of the church's course.

### **Preamble: A Confession of faith**

Just as we are proud of Francis of Assisi, Tomás Moro, Mother Teresa and Father Hurtado, we feel a sense of shame for Maciel, Karadima and many other pedophile priests and religious; and what about the cover-up bishops? We are overwhelmed that, because of this reprehensible behavior, millions of people are distancing themselves from the faith. Unfortunately, history shows that the church has, like each one of us, a dark side. Along with the holy and sacred, there coexist abuse of power, arrogance, hypocrisy, dogmatism - all the more serious when they are clothed with virtue.

However, we love the church and we recognize how much we have received from her:

- to know Christ and his message;
- to be infused with high ideals, centered on love;
- to awakening a concern for the sacred and the transcendent;
- to inculcate in us that we are part of a community, for each other;
- to encourage us to build the Kingdom, which gives meaning to our life.

That is why - despite the failures and inadequacies of Peter and his successors - Christ founded the church with the mandate to evangelize the world. Indeed, without the institutional church, with all its light and shadows, that faith could not have been transmitted from generation to generation.

**However, important as the church is, Jesus Christ is the ultimate goal. The church is only effective to the extent that it guides us towards him, his testimony and his word. That is why this crisis is doubly serious, especially for those who inadvertently put their faith in the church and its authorities, instead of in the person of Christ.**

However, we trust that this necessary renewal will purify our faith. And we must recognize that along with the negative aspects there are also many signs of hope, such as the existence of grassroots communities around the parishes where people show their desire to deepen their faith beyond the Sunday Mass. Another is the contribution of numerous movements (charismatics, catechumens, Communion and Liberation, CCX, the spiritual family of Charles de Foucauld, Focolare, Opus Dei, Schoenstatt, Apostolic Manquehue ...) by means of which the laity can live their faith more intensely, each one according to his or her charism.

However, the most important sign is in the evolution of the church's thinking about the temporal and the supernatural. For centuries the idea that the religious life was the most

perfect state prevailed, since it focused on the important and transcendent, union with God; but the laity dedicated themselves to the secondary and transitory: the things of this world.

However, the church's reflection on the message of Jesus Christ has been maturing and is coming to conclude that the Kingdom of God is not of the beyond, but rather that it begins with Jesus in the hereafter. For the building up of the Kingdom we are called to be his followers: all, not just a few. We will be judged according to what we have contributed to the building up of a civilization based on fraternity and love, the main task of the laity.

Our Protestant brothers and sisters were the first to develop this idea - 500 years ago. At the same time, other exponents of this vocation of service of the laity are to be found, as Saint Ignatius of Loyola preached in his spiritual exercises. In the twentieth century, this vocation becomes the central charism of numerous lay movements. And the Second Vatican Council makes it explicit in its fullness for the universal church.

### **Constructive Proposals**

We want a church:

1. centered on Jesus and his life project;
2. which lives and symbolizes what it preaches;
3. which is evangelical and missionary;
4. whose magisterium is focused on the essentials;
5. which distinguish between ideals and basic moral norms, and
6. whose institutional form is consistent with Jesus's message.

By the way, the church will never reach perfection, because it is composed of people like us, weak and sinful.

#### **1. A church centered on Jesus and his life project**

In past times, faith was imposed by the authority of the era. If the monarch was Christian, a culture and institutions favorable to the spread of Christianity were generated. This culture spread the faith, but at the expense of its deepening.

Today there is no longer a dominant culture. Multiple subcultures and beliefs coexist. Hence, **faith is increasingly an option of conviction, the fruit of a personal encounter with Jesus, and encouraged by the testimony of close friends.**

To stimulate such a meeting, our evangelization must locate the message of Jesus within the needs of today's man and woman. Despite the progress made by society, the usual questions retain their force. What is a full life? Is the meaning of my existence reduced to maximizing the pleasure of the moment? With what ideals and values will I build my life? The message of Jesus for humanity comes to answer such concerns. Certainly, **Christianity is not the only worldview there is, but we doubt that there is another worldview with such a powerful message to move the human being as the Sermon on the Mount, nor a project that gives more meaning to people than to love God above all things and your neighbor as yourself.** Furthermore, what better source of security and happiness can there be than to draw close to a good and merciful Father? And what makes Jesus' message and life

proposal even more attractive and credible is that he lived what he preached up to his death. This consistency attracts, especially in an era like ours, which is suspicious of institutions but thirsty for witness.

## **2. A church that lives and exemplifies what it preaches**

Every age rejects the incoherence between what is preached and what is practiced. It was Jesus himself who advised us to follow what the doctors of the law taught, but not what they practiced. Our age is particularly sensitive to incoherence and hypocrisy.

We think that an important part of the popularity that Pope Francis awakens is due to his sensitivity to symbols. Instead of residing in the vast and sumptuous apartments of the Vatican, he chooses to live in the house for priests. Instead of travelling in a luxury vehicle, he uses a small car. He declares himself Bishop of Rome and periodically visits its inhabitants. He not only blesses people but asks for their prayers. This action of his, consonant with the simplicity of Jesus and the Gospel, gives credibility to his words, which attracts both believers and non-believers.

Unfortunately, the example of Pope Francis is more the exception than the rule. Too many traditional symbols of the church push away instead of attracting. Jesus Christ preached that whoever wants to be first is to be last in honor and first in service. Is this message congruent with the titles used by the hierarchy: Most Reverend, Your Excellency? Are not such titles anachronistic? Perhaps in the monarchical era it would have made sense to be called a “prince of the church,” as the Cardinals are, but does it today? The only prince mentioned in the gospel is Satan! And how is it possible that the offices of the Archbishop of Santiago continue to be called the archepiscopal “palace”? We know that the People of God have worked and served there, but the name evokes power and not service, which is the essential value in the church of Jesus Christ.

Likewise, many of our liturgical ceremonies are pompous, full of incense and archaic clothing, which made sense in other eras, but are alien to contemporary culture. Would Jesus feel comfortable with such rites? No doubt he would see the good intention, but it is certainly a style at odds with his way of life. **Would it not be more attractive today to opt for ecclesial symbols more in keeping with the simplicity and inner purity preached by Jesus and his disciples, fishermen of Galilee?**

## **3. An evangelical and missionary church**

We recognize that serving the People of God is a big challenge, but that task is not everything. There is the whole world of non-believers. That is why Pope Francis invites us to “bet out of the shrine” and our comfort zone and preach in the public square. **A church that does not evangelize is not a church. If we are not deeply convinced that non-believers are losing the richness of knowing and following Jesus, then we must doubt our own faith.**

Now that faith no longer comes through culture, how do we interest people of good will who are in search of transcendence and thirsty to discover the way to a full life? A privileged place is through the educational system and religion classes. Indeed, it is in adolescence that most people decide what they want to do with their lives and what values will sustain them on their way. Unfortunately, with a few exceptions, religion classes are poor, more suitable for children than for young people. Its content sometimes demarcates with superstition, causing one to leave aside reason instead of using it. Not for nothing do

many young people abandon the faith and consider it a myth, just as they stop believing in Santa Claus.

Therefore, we consider it imperative that our best theologians and educators be called to design modern programs of religion for youth, placed at the peak of young people's concerns, aspirations and *intellects*, that excites them with the ideals of Jesus, his proposal of life and his example. This will require drastically improving the preparation of religion teachers, including the training of lay volunteers from other professions.

Obviously, offering such programs does not guarantee that all young people will take up the option of belief - there is nothing to guarantee it. But at least they will have been exposed to and instructed in an adult and attractive faith, so that the planted seed germinates later.

#### **4. A church whose teaching is focused on the essential**

Matthew 25 tells us that at the Last Judgment those who “fed the hungry and gave drink to the thirsty, who received the stranger, clothed the naked, visited the sick and imprisoned will enter the Kingdom.” This shows that **for Jesus the essential thing for salvation is orthopraxis, not orthodoxy. This implies reversing the current emphasis on doctrinal purity toward purity (never fully attainable) of praxis.**

Doctrine is important only to the extent that it leads us to orthopraxis. Which doctrines lead to orthopraxis is a matter of reflection and discussion. But it seems to us to be a set of dogmas much smaller than those now listed in the catechism. The Creed can be a good starting point (and perhaps arrival).

It is also necessary to distinguish between doctrines of fundamental importance and doctrines of secondary or tertiary relevance. The doctrines of “first importance” will be those that have historically been shown to be closest to Jesus and his message, so they can be considered a condition for professing the Catholic faith. The doctrines of “secondary” or “third-level” importance should be those that complement those of the “first level” or help someone to approach Jesus.

Will these doctrines be of the same importance for faith: original sin, the theory of atonement, purgatory, indulgences, capital sins, Marian devotion, the precepts of the church, the divinity of Jesus and the Holy Trinity, love of God and neighbor, the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, forgiveness of sins, and eternal life? In short, all those concepts found in the Gospels and the early church should be considered of primary importance. If this distinction is not made, there is a risk of confusing what is fundamental for a Christian life with what is not and, therefore, of creating unnecessary problems and doubts in matters not essential for achieving it.

Would this distinction of a faith based more on the essential and less on the accessory not lead us also towards a rapprochement with our Orthodox and Protestant brothers and sisters?

#### **5. A church that distinguishes ideal behaviors from the basic moral standards that their faithful must fulfill**

Jesus never played “fast and loose” with the law. It was demanding, far beyond this. For him, the external fulfillment of the law is not enough if it is not about the desires and intentions of the heart. That is why, for example, destroying the reputation of the other is a

way to kill him, just as looking with lust upon a woman is a form of adultery. However, he was not only demanding, but also compassionate toward the fallen. It is what he told us in the parable of the prodigal son. It is what he did in forgiving the adulterous woman. He calls us to go beyond the minimum - to overcome the Pharisee who boasts of his virtue in complying with the law; but he is compassionate to those who recognize themselves in need of forgiveness, such as the tax collector beat his chest for his sins.

**The church must not stop motivating us towards the ideal that Jesus proposes to us. However, it has to recognize that there is a difference between the ideal that Jesus calls us - to aspire to the maximum - and the minimum that a parishioner should be required to do, simply because they are a person.** The church has developed this distinction in many subjects, for example, in the management of our material goods. Jesus said that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. He also proposed to the rich young man that if he wanted to be perfect he should sell all his goods and give them to the poor and then follow him. The church has interpreted this “evangelical” poverty proposed by Jesus as an ideal to which every Christian should aspire, but it does not consider one’s breach a mortal sin. Those who pay a fair wage to workers and earn a fair remuneration for their effort are honored; they meet the minimum (natural law), although we have the Christian ideal of sharing all our goods with the needy.

Likewise, the ideal of love of neighbor would be to “turn the other cheek” if one is attacked. However, this bare minimum is to curb our instinct for revenge and comply with justice. In other cases we have elevated what is an ideal to the minimum required by morality. An example of this is the ideal of marriage: that it be love for life. It is what every couple believes and wants when they get married; it is what is reflected in the poetry and the spontaneous oaths of eternal fidelity of the lovers of all times; is what Jesus tells us was the intention of God, when asked about the divorce allowed by Moses. But is the matrimonial indissolubility the minimum required of every person, so it would be a mortal sin to divorce and remarry? Or can this not be an ideal to which we should aspire, but not the minimum required? This distinction between the ideal marriage and the minimum required is what makes our Orthodox and Protestant brothers and sisters allow people whose marriages failed - after a real attempt to reunite - to divorce and can remarry, continuing in communion with the church .

Something similar could be said about sexual relations. The ideal is that they are signs of love in a stable and permanent relationship (marriage). And without a doubt, it is necessary to continue insisting on the ideal of relating sex with love, especially in a society such as the one where the sexual act is trivialized, reducing it to pure narcissistic pleasure. But should we not distinguish between promiscuous sexual relationships, without love, of pre-marital relationships, and cases where the act of love is that: an expression of love between the two, even if it is not marriage?

As in all moral issues, the voice of an open and educated conscience has the last word, predisposed to doubt the impulse of desire and counteract it. However, we believe that Catholic morality would benefit from a systematic review of its traditional positions under the magnifying glass of the distinction between what is the ideal and what is the minimum required of each person.

## **6. A church whose institutional form is in accordance with Jesus's message**

There are different charisms in the church, all necessary: that of the laity, to build the Kingdom; that of the clergy, to preach, administer the sacraments, and encourage the laity; that of the bishops, to guide and organize evangelization and maintain the unity of the people of God; that of the Pope as “*primus inter pares*,” to maintain the unity of the church.

However, over the centuries some of these charisms have been privileged and others atrophied. So much so that **the church today resembles much more the structure of a “Prussian army” than a community of the faithful, with an apex of those with power and a base which is passive and obedient. The Pope has become “the” authority, almost omnipotent, in doctrine, morals and the government of the church, supported by the curia, an “elite” with little transparency, hermetically sealed, self-complacent and far-removed from the flock.** It is one thing to listen with openness and due respect to the words and teachings of the Pope, and another thing to pretend that all his sayings are dogmas. In fact, only two of the teachings subsequent to the declaration of papal infallibility in the First Vatican Council are considered dogmas by theologians: the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (and in both cases it was said that the belief and practice of the People of God for centuries was simply being ratified).

Theologians distinguish between the extraordinary (infallible) magisterium and the ordinary magisterium. The ordinary magisterium is day-to-day, starting with the catechism, Sunday homilies in the parish, the letters of the bishop or the Pope, the declarations of the Episcopal Conference, and even guiding universal councils (like Vatican II, which did not set out to “define dogmas”). Undoubtedly there is the accumulated wisdom of the church for centuries, but there are also weeds: erroneous theologies, cultural prejudices, partial approaches, and frankly mistaken statements. As a whole, it is all very relevant and beneficial, but it is not necessary to consecrate everything. The infallible magisterium is that set of doctrines important and relevant to salvation (although, as we said above, none is essential except the orthopraxis of Matthew 25), which primarily distinguishes Christians from non-Christians and non-believers and, secondarily, Catholics from non-Catholic Christians. The ordinary magisterium is very broad. The infallible magisterium, referring to exceptional declarations of Councils and the Pope, is very limited, *whose limits are still a matter of discussion among theologians*.

**We know that Jesus promised to be with his church until the end of time “so that the gates of hell would not prevail against it.” But it seems to us an urgent task for theologians to specify how far this promise of Jesus extends to protect his church from irremediable fundamental errors.** This requires limiting this infallible teaching to the essentials of Jesus' message. As a step in the direction of clarifying the limits of the extraordinary magisterium, we think the previous distinction between doctrines of the first order to help salvation and others that are secondary is promising.

On the other hand, however much respect we owe the Pope and his teaching, not everything that he or his predecessors say and do is necessarily good and correct. They can also make serious mistakes in their appointments, especially if they do not listen to the episcopate and the laity. There are hopeful signs: fraternal correction to Pope Francis by the bishop of Boston when Francis tried to slander the accusations against Bishop Barros; the perseverance of the community of Osorno which insisted on not accepting the

bishop is also admirable, even though until recently he counted on the confidence of the Pope. The “fraternal correction” goes in both directions, not only from top to bottom (typical nowadays), but also from the bottom up to the authorities (where much is still lacking).

If in practice the papacy is oversized in its role and authority, the bishops are too small in their own right. This implies *institutionally* recognizing the collegiality of bishops both nationally and universally. They trace their authority directly from the apostles. They are bishops as is the Bishop of Rome. Major decisions in matters of doctrine, morals, or liturgy should be the fruit of a collegial reflection of the bishops in a universal council convened by the Pope, successor of Peter and Bishop of Rome.

The role of the laity in the church is almost totally atrophied due to the reigning clericalism of centuries past, based on a theology that expired with Vatican II. That Council insisted not only that the Kingdom of God begins in this world, but that building it up is the work of the entire People of God. Lay people and religious are equally responsible, each with their own charism.

However, clericalism persists in practice - both in the clergy and among the laity. For example, concerning recent events of the church in Chile, the voice of the laity has been largely absent. The laity have been spectators, each one asking himself or herself, why does the “Church” allow these abuses? Why do the bishops and/or the Pope not do something? But with few exceptions, the laity have sat out. By the way, the laity were not consulted by the hierarchy when the current crisis broke out. But nothing and nobody prevented us from expressing our opinions freely once it came to light. Where is the opinion of the laity? Rather, where are the opinions? Well, surely there will be a great diversity of points of view. If the laity wish to be heard, they must first of all express themselves. And that voice of the laity must be incorporated institutionally into the structure of the church. Each parish has, in theory, a lay parish council, and we imagine that the bishop will also have his diocesan council. But apparently these councils work at the discretion of the parish priest or bishop. Should lay councils have a purely advisory role, or should they have a binding role for some issues? Can they suggest the removal of a parish priest or a bishop? Should they not be at least consulted before the appointment of either? What institutional role should lay movements have?

In addition, we must recognize that women do the most work but participate the least in decisions within the church. Perhaps, for some, it is too soon for the idea of a female priesthood. However, everyone will agree that women should have leadership in the church similar to that of men. And this should be reflected in the different lay councils and in the leadership of the church, stripping it of the *machismo* that has historically characterized it.

Finally, a few words about the clergy. Our hearts are with that majority of priests and nuns who work day by day in the apostolate without greater recognition, and who today have to bear the cross of being suspected of abuse and corruption by the action of the few. We also feel pained for that great number of village priests, or the lone parish priest, who live such self-sacrificing lives *in great solitude*. But this last cross is not necessary. **The priestly life is demanding enough as it is, almost heroic, to demand also the affective loneliness of celibacy. It seems to us that it is time to return to the practice of earlier eras in the West and to this day in the Eastern rites of our own Catholic Church , that priests, at least diocesan priests, can be**

**married.** Celibacy would be required only for monastic life and religious orders whose labor requires it.

## **Conclusion**

No doubt our assertions are incomplete; nuances will be missing and there will be more than one error. And even if everything we say is relevant, what is proposed here is not “the” way, but at the very least, a few steps in the direction that we think is right. We know there are many people with other ideas of how and where to go. Those proposals are welcome. We invite those who feel that their own feelings are represented in this letter to sign it. But just as important, we invite those who do not agree with us or feel that there are other ways to express your feelings publicly. But let’s start walking, because as Jesus himself told us, “the harvest is abundant but the workers are few. The church is not just a matter for religious. It is time for the laity to assume the role that corresponds to us as the People of God.

Santiago, Chile, June 2018

*The signatures of 51 people are found [here](#).*