

Alter Christus

*“As an **alter Christus** (another Christ) the priest is in Christ, for Christ and with Christ... Because he belongs to Christ, the priest is radically at the service of all people: he is the minister of their salvation” (Pope Benedict XVI)*

Monthly bulletin dedicated to all the Priests of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands

Letter to Priests

By Pope Francis

[Extracts from the letter of Pope Francis to priests on the 160th anniversary of the death of the Holy Cure of Ars, St John Vianney, 4 August 2019]

To my Brother Priests
Dear Brothers,

A hundred and sixty years have passed since the death of the holy Curé of Ars, whom Pope Pius XI proposed as the patron of parish priests throughout the world. On this, his feast day, I write this letter

not only to parish priests but to all of you, my brother priests, who have quietly “left all behind” in order to immerse yourselves in the daily life of your communities. Like the Curé of Ars, you serve “in the trenches”, bearing the burden of the day and the heat (cf. Mt 20:12), confronting an endless variety of situations in your effort to care for and accompany God’s people. I want to say a word to each of you who, often without fanfare and at personal cost, amid weariness, infirmity and sorrow, carry out your

mission of service to God and to your people. Despite the hardships of the journey, you are writing the finest pages of the priestly life.

Some time ago, I shared with the Italian bishops my worry that, in more than a few places, our priests feel themselves attacked and blamed for crimes they did not commit. I mentioned that priests need to find in their bishop an older brother and a father who reassures them in these difficult times, encouraging and supporting them along the way.

As an older brother and a father, I too would like in this letter to thank you in the name of the holy and faithful People of God for all that you do for them, and to encourage you never to forget the words that the Lord spoke with great love to us on the day of our ordination. Those words are the

source of our joy: “I no longer call you servants... I call you friends” (Jn 15:15).

PAIN

In these years, we have become more attentive to the cry, often silent and suppressed, of our brothers and sisters who were victims of the abuse of power, the abuse of conscience and sexual abuse on the part of ordained ministers. This has been a time of great suffering in the lives of those who experienced such abuse, but also in the lives of their families and of the entire People of God.

This pain has also affected priests. I have seen it in the course of my pastoral visits in my own diocese and elsewhere, in my meetings and personal conversations with priests.



Pope Francis

Francis, also called Francis I, original name Jorge Mario Bergoglio, (born December 17, 1936, Buenos Aires, Argentina), the bishop of Rome and the leader of the Roman Catholic Church (2013–). He was the first pope from the Western Hemisphere, the first from South America, and the first from the Jesuit order.

GRATITUDE

Many have shared with me their outrage at what happened and their frustration that “for all their hard work, they have to face the damage that was done, the suspicion and uncertainty to which it has given rise, and the doubts, fears and disheartenment felt by more than a few”. I have received many letters from priests expressing those feelings. At the same time, I am comforted by my meetings with pastors who recognize and share the pain and suffering of the victims and of the People of God, and have tried to find words and actions capable of inspiring hope.

Without denying or dismissing the harm caused by some of our brothers, it would be unfair not to express our gratitude to all those priests who faithfully and generously spend their lives in the service of others (cf. 2 Cor 12:15). They embody a spiritual fatherhood capable of weeping with those who weep. Countless priests make of their lives a work of mercy in areas or situations that are often hostile, isolated or ignored, even at the risk of their lives. I acknowledge and appreciate your courageous and steadfast example; in these times of turbulence, shame and pain, you demonstrate that you have joyfully put your lives on the line for the sake of the Gospel.

Vocation, more than our own choice, is a response to the Lord’s unmerited call. We do well to return constantly to those passages of the Gospel where we see Jesus praying, choosing and calling others “to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message” (Mk 3:14).

One day, each of us spoke up and said “yes”, a “yes” born and developed in the heart of the Christian community thanks to those “saints next door” who showed us by their simple faith that it was worthwhile committing ourselves completely to the Lord and his kingdom. A “yes” whose implications were so momentous that often we find it hard to imagine all the goodness that it continues to produce. How beautiful it is when an elderly priest sees or is visited by those children – now adults – whom he baptized long ago and who now gratefully introduce a family of their own! At times like this, we realize that we were anointed to anoint others, and that God’s anointing never disappoints. I am led to say with the Apostle: “I do not cease to give thanks for you” (cf. Eph 1:16) and for all the good that you have done.

Amid trials, weakness and the consciousness of our limitations, “the worst temptation of all is to keep

brooding over our troubles” for then we lose our perspective, our good judgement and our courage. At those times, it is important – I would even say crucial – to cherish the memory of the Lord’s presence in our lives and his merciful gaze, which inspired us to put our lives on the line for him and for his People. And to find the strength to persevere and, with the Psalmist, to raise our own song of praise, “for his mercy endures forever” (Ps 136).

Dear brother priests, I thank you for your fidelity to the commitments you have made. It is a sign that, in a society and culture that glorifies the ephemeral, there are still people unafraid to make lifelong promises. In effect, we show that we continue to believe in God, who has never broken his covenant, despite our having broken it countless times. In this way, we celebrate the fidelity of God, who continues to trust us, to believe in us and to count on us, for all our sins and failings, and who invites us to be faithful in turn. Realizing that we hold this treasure in earthen vessels (cf. 2 Cor 4:7), we know that the Lord triumphs through weakness (cf. 2 Cor 12:9). He continues to sustain us and to renew his call, repaying us a hundredfold (cf. Mk 10:29-30). “For his mercy endures forever”.

Thank you for the joy with which

you have offered your lives, revealing a heart that over the years has refused to become closed and bitter, but has grown daily in love for God and his people. A heart that, like good wine, has not turned sour but become richer with age. “For his mercy endures forever”.

Thank you for working to strengthen the bonds of fraternity and friendship with your brother priests and your bishop, providing one another with support and encouragement, caring for those who are ill, seeking out those who keep apart, visiting the elderly and drawing from their wisdom, sharing with one another and learning to laugh and cry together. How much we need this! But thank you too for your faithfulness and perseverance in undertaking difficult missions, or for those times when you have had to call a brother priest to order. “For his mercy endures forever”.

Thank you for your witness of persistence and patient endurance (*hypomoné*) in pastoral ministry. Often, with the *parrhesía* of the shepherd, we find ourselves arguing with the Lord in prayer, as Moses did in courageously interceding for the people (cf. Num 14:13-19; Ex 32:30-32; Dt 9:18-21). “For his mercy endures forever”.

Thank you for celebrating the Eucharist each day and for being

merciful shepherds in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, neither rigorous nor lax, but deeply concerned for your people and accompanying them on their journey of conversion to the new life that the Lord bestows on us all. We know that on the ladder of mercy we can descend to the depths of our human condition – including weakness and sin – and at the same time experience the heights of divine perfection: “Be merciful as the Father is merciful”. In this way, we are “capable of warming people’s hearts, walking at their side in the dark, talking with them and even entering into their night and their darkness, without losing our way”. “For his mercy endures forever”.

Thank you for anointing and fervently proclaiming to all, “in season and out of season” (cf. 2 Tim 4:2) the Gospel of Jesus Christ, probing the heart of your community “in order to discover where its desire for God is alive and ardent, as well as where that dialogue, once loving, has been thwarted and is now barren”. “For his mercy endures forever”.

Thank you for the times when, with great emotion, you embraced sinners, healed wounds, warmed hearts and showed the tenderness and compassion of the Good Samaritan (cf. Lk 10:25-27). Nothing is more necessary than this: accessibility,

closeness, readiness to draw near to the flesh of our suffering brothers and sisters. How powerful is the example of a priest who makes himself present and does not flee the wounds of his brothers and sisters! It mirrors the heart of a shepherd who has developed a spiritual taste for being one with his people, a pastor who never forgets that he has come from them and that by serving them he will find and express his most pure and complete identity. This in turn will lead to adopting a simple and austere way of life, rejecting privileges that have nothing to do with the Gospel. “For his mercy endures forever”.

ENCOURAGEMENT

My second great desire is, in the words of Saint Paul, to offer encouragement as we strive to renew our priestly spirit, which is above all the fruit of the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Faced with painful experiences, all of us need to be comforted and encouraged. The mission to which we are called does not exempt us from suffering, pain and even misunderstanding. Rather, it requires us to face them squarely and to accept them, so that the Lord can transform them and conform us more closely to himself. “Ultimately, the lack of a heartfelt and prayerful

acknowledgment of our limitations prevents grace from working more effectively within us, for no room is left for bringing about the potential good that is part of a sincere and genuine journey of growth”.

One good way of testing our hearts as pastors is to ask how we confront suffering. We can often act like the levite or the priest in the parable, stepping aside and ignoring the injured man (cf. Lk 10:31-32). Or we can draw near in the wrong way, viewing situations in the abstract and taking refuge in commonplaces, such as: “That’s life...”, or “Nothing can be done”. In this way, we yield to an uneasy fatalism. Or else we can draw near with a kind of aloofness that brings only isolation and exclusion. “Like the prophet Jonah, we are constantly tempted to flee to a safe haven. It can have many names: individualism, spiritualism, living in a little world...” Far from making us compassionate, this ends up holding us back from confronting our own wounds, the wounds of others and consequently the wounds of Jesus himself.

Along these same lines, I would mention another subtle and dangerous attitude, which, as Bernanos liked to say, is “the most precious of the devil's potions”. It is also the most harmful for those of

us who would serve the Lord, for it breeds discouragement, desolation and despair. Disappointment with life, with the Church or with ourselves can tempt us to latch onto a sweet sorrow or sadness that the Eastern Fathers called *acedia*. Cardinal Tomáš Špidlík described it in these terms: “If we are assailed by sadness at life, at the company of others or at our own isolation, it is because we lack faith in God’s providence and his works... Sadness paralyzes our desire to persevere in our work and prayer; it makes us hard to live with... The monastic authors who treated this vice at length call it the worst enemy of the spiritual life.”

All of us are aware of a sadness that can turn into a habit and lead us slowly to accept evil and injustice by quietly telling us: “It has always been like this”. A sadness that stifles every effort at change and conversion by sowing resentment and hostility. “That is no way to live a dignified and fulfilled life; it is not God’s will for us, nor is it the life of the Spirit, which has its source in the heart of the risen Christ”, to which we have been called. Dear brothers, when that sweet sorrow threatens to take hold of our lives or our communities, without being fearful or troubled, yet with firm resolution, let us together beg the Spirit to “rouse us from our

torpor, to free us from our inertia. Let us rethink our usual way of doing things; let us open our eyes and ears, and above all our hearts, so as not to be complacent about things as they are, but unsettled by the living and effective word of the risen Lord”.

Let me repeat: in times of difficulty, we all need God’s consolation and strength, as well as that of our brothers and sisters. All of us can benefit from the touching words that Saint Paul addressed to his communities: “I pray that you may not lose heart over [my] sufferings” (Eph 3:13), and “I want [your] hearts to be encouraged” (Col 2:22). In this way, we can carry out the mission that the Lord gives us anew each day: to proclaim “good news of great joy for all the people” (Lk 2:10). Not by presenting intellectual theories or moral axioms about the way things ought to be, but as men who in the midst of pain have been transformed and transfigured by the Lord and, like Job, can exclaim: “I knew you then only by hearsay, but now I have seen you with my own eyes” (Job 42:2). Without this foundational experience, all of our hard work will only lead to frustration and disappointment.

We know that it is not easy to stand before the Lord and let his gaze examine our lives, heal our wounded hearts and cleanse our feet of the

worldliness accumulated along the way, which now keeps us from moving forward. In prayer, we experience the blessed “insecurity” which reminds us that we are disciples in need of the Lord’s help, and which frees us from the promethean tendency of “those who ultimately trust only in their own powers and feel superior to others because they observe certain rules”.

Dear brothers, Jesus, more than anyone, is aware of our efforts and our accomplishments, our failures and our mistakes. He is the first to tell us: “Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Mt 11:28-29).

Brothers, let us indeed acknowledge our weaknesses, but also let Jesus transform them and send us forth anew to the mission. Let us never lose the joy of knowing that we are “the sheep of his flock” and that he is our Lord and Shepherd.

For our hearts to be encouraged, we should not neglect the dialectic that determines our identity. First, our relationship with Jesus. Whenever we turn away from Jesus or neglect our relationship with him, slowly but surely our commitment begins to fade

and our lamps lose the oil needed to light up our lives (cf. Mt 25:1-13): “Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me... because apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:4-5). In this regard, I would encourage you not to neglect spiritual direction. Look for a brother with whom you can speak, reflect, discuss and discern, sharing with complete trust and openness your journey. A wise brother with whom to share the experience of discipleship. Find him, meet with him and enjoy his guidance, accompaniment and counsel. This is an indispensable aid to carrying

out your ministry in obedience to the will of the Father (cf. Heb 10:9) and letting your heart beat with “the mind that was in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5). We can profit from the words of Ecclesiastes: “Two are better than one... One will lift up the other; but woe to the one who is alone and falls, and does not have another to help!” (4:9-10).

May the Lord Jesus bless you and the Holy Virgin watch over you. And please, I ask you not to forget to pray for me.

Faternally,

FRANCIS



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