



Pastoral Letter

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on the occasion of
the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary
2018

We are in need of Christ

Although many in our country are quite well to do, one often gets the impression that quite a few experience a sense of emptiness, and in spite of their material gains they don't manage to feel satisfied. As Christ pointedly says: "Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). And it's not a wonder that Jesus tells the Jews not to work "for food that cannot last, but ... for food that endures to eternal life, the kind of food the Son of Man is offering you" (John 6:27). When the Jews ask him to give them of this bread, Jesus interestingly makes a very strong statement: "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never be hungry" (John 6:35).

Civil authority, agencies for social welfare as well as the market can all help to fill one's belly and one's pockets, thereby satisfying material needs; but it is only a spiritual experience which provides an answer to man's interior needs. Man's heart rests only when it finds God. This truth encourages us, as a Church, the people of God, to heed the need of renewal and holiness – as Pope Francis tells us in his recent Apostolic Exhortation *Rejoice and be glad*. If we desire a holy life, if we live our life modelled on that of Jesus, then we can become missionaries in our own country, and we can bring ever more persons to experience the love of Jesus.

It is a fact that many of those experiencing spiritual emptiness are in fact Church-goers, people who consider themselves disciples of Christ! Although we have an abundance of celebrations and religious rites, the summer festas being a case in point, I have to seriously question whether we Christians really know Jesus. Because although one can be baptised and be a religious, a priest or a bishop, there is a real risk that we still do not know Jesus! I feel that among us there are many who know about Jesus but who "have not learnt from Christ" (cf Ephesians 4:20). For some of us religion is a kind of bartering with God: we light a candle so God hears our prayer! Often we turn to God when everything else fails us! Still others are convinced their relationship with God depends on their works, such as a pilgrimage to Ta' Pinu or to The

Redeemer in Isla, going to church on Sunday and such like. Even the honour we give the saints often does not go beyond the statue concerned or some devotion, as when we pray to Saint Anthony to find us some mislaid object! Not to mention those for whom religious and church activities are but a pleasant hobby! It is true that devotions can bring us closer to God, but where necessary, they need to be purified so that from a mechanical and almost magical relationship with God, they help us build up a relationship based on the love of God, replete with confidence in Him and peace of heart.

For our faith to be a mature one, it has to be based on the person of Jesus Christ. Our confidence in him has to be such that we rely on his word! Jesus “is the centre of world history and of the whole of creation: he knows us and he loves us, he is the companion and friend of our life, the man of sorrows and of hope, he is the one who will come again as our love and, we hope, as the fulfilment of our life and our joy forever” (Paul VI, *Homily*, Manila, 29 November 1970). Jesus is the only one necessary. For the one who finds Jesus, everything in life becomes relative. Jesus is that treasure which one finds and does away with everything else in order to acquire it and never lose it (cf Matthew 13:44). We are more likely to appreciate this treasure in a moment of trial, and when we are suffering and find ourselves in trouble. I know so many people who think they have lost their faith when they are going through suffering. I am convinced however, that in those difficult moments their faith becomes more authentic. There, in suffering, this treasure is turned into consolation, peace of heart, hope, courage; it is changed into trust that suffering, even if destructive, does not constitute the last word. Like Saint Augustine, the one who experiences the goodness of Jesus will get to the point of saying: “We rejoice and we give thanks because we are not only Christians but we have become Christ. My brothers, can you hear, do you understand the extent of God’s grace for us? Wonder and rejoice: we have become Christ. Because if he is the head, we are his members; he and us together, we are the whole man ... and therefore the fulness of Christ and the Church” (*In Io. tract.* 21. 8; PL 35. 1568).

Had we really been convinced of this, then surely we would be more committed to the Sacramental life, to the careful reading of the Word of God and to prayer. The type of liturgy we celebrate is an indication of the sort of faith we have in Christ; it is really a pity that we still forego a liturgy which can set our hearts on a divine fire because of our attachment to tradition. He who finds Jesus will cherish all that is spiritual. He who yearns for Jesus does not only make sure he misses no occasion to get to know him better, but will also try to pass on to others this longing for him. This is what parents do when they pass on their faith to their children. How I long to see a more meaningful practice of confession in peace and quiet rather than in a hurry during Mass! How I wish there were more parishes, more communities and small groups who organise weekend breaks dedicated to spiritual retreats! How I wish we could learn to make more use of the help of a spiritual

director! And how I wish to see more of us engaged in personal prayer in the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist in the stillness of the chapels dedicated precisely to this end!

It so happens that the fortieth anniversary of the death of Pope Paul VI fell on Monday last; and Paul VI will be canonised this coming October. A little more than fifty years ago, on the 6th of August 1964 to be precise, this Pope regaled us with a wonderful Encyclical replete with teaching about the Church. *Ecclesiam suam* remains extremely relevant today in spite of the passage of years. I have to confess that when I became bishop thirteen years ago, inspired by this Encyclical, I wanted to write a Pastoral letter on my vision for our particular church. And my dream still persists. In the first part of that Encyclical, Paul VI talks about the Church's need to become more aware of its identity and to confront her reality with that of the ideal Church Christ saw, wanted and loved as his spouse (cf ES, 11).

In this light, I call upon our Church – in particular upon our parish councils – to carry out this exercise and check its Christological foundations. I have my doubts as to whether our Church is convinced of this truth! I am afraid that Christ is not the centre of our lives – neither on an individual level nor on a parochial one. There are many who love the Church and work for Christ but as to Christ's will, only a few carry it out. If only we were to experience Jesus, then our life (laity, religious and clergy) would be very different. Had Jesus been in our heart, then we would have much more apostolic fervour and compassion for a tried humanity. This is the cry of your Bishop!

I question whether as a Church we are in fact offering the food which lasts unto eternal life. Unfortunately we only feed the emotions and nostalgia of some for a Church of the past. Sometimes it seems we are more intent on satisfying sociocultural needs related to religion than to help man cross the threshold of the mystery of God! Every time we do so we would only be providing material food, lovely to behold and with an inviting smell, but ultimately deprived of spiritual substance. All this is “food which passes away”, whereas as Jesus says, we have to exert ourselves for the food which lasts to eternal life.

We often hear lately of initiatives undertaken by a number of parishes to carry out restoration works on the church or on works of art in the church. This type of work should remind us of a much more important task involving the restoration of the “living blocks of stone” (1 Peter 2:5), the ones who are baptised. I wouldn't like us to go through the experience of Saint Francis of Assisi: when Christ called upon him to mend his Church, at first he thought Christ was calling him to repair the ruined church of Saint Damian! But the Poor Man of Assisi realised soon enough that what Jesus really wanted him to do was to help the Church, which with the passage of time had clothed herself in a way which was no longer meaningful; to help her find her true identity

and her Christological roots. These are the true restoration works which our Church urgently requires. The Church “cannot remain motionless and indifferent in the face of the changes happening around us. She not only has to adapt herself to the concepts and customs which the times bring with them and almost force themselves upon her, but she also has to approach them, encourage them, embellish them, develop them and sanctify them” (ES, 42).

On the occasion of the feast of the Assumption of Our Lady let us pray to the Mother of the Church to help us restructure our beloved Church, because, as Pope Francis says, “today too Jesus wants to continue building up his Church, this house with a sure foundation, but in which cracks are also to be found; and therefore it is in need of mending. The Church always needs renewal and restoration” (*Angelus*, 27th August 2017). Even when we see some stones get loose and fall, or even if a supporting arch of the sanctuary totters, when the Church is resting on Jesus Christ then we should not lose heart because he, Jesus, the keystone, is still in place.

The ecclesiological and pastoral challenges which we face are not slight; but this does not mean we don't have to face them. It is truly heartening to see that in the Church there are many priests, consecrated persons and lay people who, sharing this hope together, are truly committed to this renewal. One can mention here the commitment to catechetical renewal with special attention to certain categories such as autistic children; lay people committed to the formation of engaged couples in preparation for married and family life; the generosity of many for the deprived, as in the case of immigrants, of fostering and of the donation of blood; young people who carry out voluntary and missionary work and from the midst of whom we have seen sprouting vocations to the priesthood and to consecrated life; and in general, so many other such experiences. These are but a few of our Church's riches which we want to see expanding and developing. Through the intercession of Our Lady, let us pray God together for the gift of perseverance.

I implore Heaven's blessings upon you.

Given today from the Bishop's Curia, Monday the 6th of August 2018, the feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord.

✠ Mario Grech
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