

S.O.S. for Today's Church

A Personal Letter to Pope Benedict XVI

by Rev. Henri Boulad, S.J. Graz, July 18th 2007

(translated from the French by Richard Cros)

Dear Holy Father,

I am addressing you directly because my heart bleeds at the sight of the abyss into which our Church is sinking today. Please excuse my frankness that is filial and dictated both by the "freedom of the children of God" to which St. Paul has called us as well as by my passionate love for the Church. Perhaps you will excuse the alarmist tone of this letter, for I believe that it is already the eleventh hour and that confronting the present situation must not be further delayed.

Introduction

Let me first of all present myself. I am an Egyptian-Lebanese Jesuit of the Melkite rite. Soon I will be 7- years old. For three years I have been the rector of the Jesuit College in Cairo after having served in the following capacities: superior of the Jesuits in Alexandria, regional superior of all the Jesuits in Egypt, professor of theology in Cairo, director of Caritas-Egypt, and vice-president of CARITAS INTERNATIONALIS for the Middle East and North Africa.

I know the Catholic hierarchy of Egypt quite well, having participated in its gatherings for several years in my role as President of the General Assembly of Religious Superiors in Egypt. I have very close personal relations with each of them - some of whom are my former students. Furthermore I personally know the Coptic Pope Chenouda III whom I frequently visit.

As for the Catholic hierarchy in Europe I have had many occasions to meet personally this one or that one of its members such as Cardinal Koenig, Cardinal Schoenborn, Cardinal Martini, Cardinal Daneels, Archbishop Kothgasser, the diocesan Bishops Kapellari and Küng, other Austrian bishops, and bishops from other European countries. These meetings took place during my participation at annual conferences in Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Hungary, France and Belgium. During these events I spoke to various groups as well as to the media (newspapers, radio and TV). I did the same in Egypt and the Middle East.

I have visited some fifty countries on four continents and have published over thirty works in fifteen languages, especially French, Arabic, Hungarian and German. Among my thirteen books in German you have perhaps read *Gottessöhne*, *Gottestöchter* that your friend Father Erich Fink from Bavaria gave you.

I do not say all of this out of vanity, Holy Father, but to tell you simply that my proposals are founded on a real knowledge of the universal Church and its situation today in 2009.

The Purpose of This Letter

I come now to the purpose of this letter in which I will try to be as (a) brief (as possible, as) clear and objective as possible. First of all, a list of a certain number of realities – by no means exclusive.

1. Religious practice is in constant decline. The churches of Europe and Canada are only frequented by an increasing number of aging people who will soon be gone. There will be nothing left to do but close churches or transform them into museums, mosques, club houses or municipal libraries - something that is already under way. What surprises me is that many churches are already in the process of renovation and modernization at great expense in order to attract the faithful. But it is not such things that will stop the exodus.
2. Seminaries and novitiates are emptying at the same rate and vocations are in freefall. The future is rather somber and we must wonder who can take up the work. More and more European parishes are actually being taken up by Asian and African priests.
3. Many priests are leaving the priesthood. The small number of those who still continue their ministry and who are well past the retirement age have to serve multiple parishes in an expeditious and administrative manner. Many of them, both in Europe as well as in the Third World live in concubinage – in full view and knowledge of their parishioners who often approve them, and their bishop who can do nothing about it given the shortage of priests.

4. The language of the Church is out of date, anachronistic, boring, repetitious, and totally unsuited to our age. It is not at all a matter of going with the flow or of accommodation, because the message of the Gospel ought to be presented uncooked and to the point. What is needed rather is to move to that new “evangelization” to which John Paul II called us. Contrary to what many people think, it consists in not repeating toothless old stuff, but rather in innovating and (the) inventing a new language that recasts the faith in a pertinent and meaningful way for men and women of today.

5. None of this can happen without an in-depth renewal of theology and catechesis that has to be rethought and reformulated from top to bottom. A priest and German religious I recently met told me that the word “mystical” was not mentioned once in the New Catechism. I was flabbergasted. It is clear that our faith is very cerebral, abstract and dogmatic. It speaks little to the heart or the body.

6. As a result, a great number of Christians are turning to the religions of Asia, to sects, to New Age, to evangelical churches, occultism and more. Why be surprised? They are seeking elsewhere the nourishment that they don't find with us, for they have the impression that we are giving them stones instead of bread. The Christian faith that once gave meaning to people's lives has become for them today an enigma, the leftovers of a dead past.

7. In the matter of morality and ethics, the injunctions of the Magisterium, repeated *ad nauseam* on marriage, contraception, abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, clerical celibacy, divorce and remarriage, etc. touch nobody and only engender weariness and indifference. All these moral and pastoral problems deserve more than preemptory declarations. They deserve an approach that is pastoral, sociological, psychological and humane approach in a way more in keeping with the Gospel.

8. The Catholic Church, which has been the great European educator for centuries, seems to have forgotten that this same Europe has grown up. Adult Europe today refuses to be treated like a child. The paternalistic style of a *Mater et Magistra* Church is definitely off the mark and no longer fits the bill today. Our Christian people have learned to think for themselves and are not about to swallow whatever comes along.

9. The nations once most Catholic – France, “the eldest daughter of the Church,” or ultra-Catholic French Canada - have made a 180 degree turn toward atheism, anti-clericalism, agnosticism and indifference. For a number of other European countries the process is on-going. One notices that the more a people have been nurtured and mothered by the Church the greater is the reaction against her.

10. Dialog with other churches and religions is today in a disquieting decline. The remarkable advances realized over the past half century seem at this time compromised.

Faced with this rather overwhelming situation the Church's reaction is twofold.

- It tends to minimize the gravity of the reality and consoles itself by considering a certain renewal taking place in its most traditional wing as well as in the Third World.

- It invokes confidence in the Lord who has sustained the Church throughout twenty centuries and who will be able to help it overcome this new crisis as He has done in ages past. Doesn't the Church have His promises for eternal life?

My response to this

It is not by collecting shards under the buttresses of the past that one will resolve the problems of today and tomorrow.

The apparent vitality of the Church in the Third World is deceptive. In all likelihood these new churches will sooner or later pass through the same crises as old Christian Europe.

The road to modernity cannot be by-passed and it is precisely because the Church has forgotten this that we have such a crisis today. Vatican II tried to make up for the four centuries it had lost, but today one has the impression that the Church is in the process of once more closing the doors that had been opened and is tempted to turn back to Trent and Vatican I rather than Vatican II. We should recall the injunction repeated several times by Pope John-Paul II: "There is no alternative to Vatican II."

How long are we going to engage in the politics of the ostrich and bury our heads in the sand? How long will we refuse to look things in the face? How long will we keep trying to salvage the façade at any price – a façade that deceives no one today? How long will we continue to cringe and take aim at any criticism rather than seeing in it a chance for renewal? How long are we going to put off till doomsday a reformation that is imperative and has been avoided far too long?

It is in resolutely looking to the future and not the past that the Church will accomplish her mission of being a "light to the world, salt of the earth, leaven to the dough." What we see today unfortunately is that the Church is dragging behind our times, after having led the world for centuries.

I must repeat what I said at the opening of this letter: It is the eleventh hour! *fünf vor zwölf!* History is not waiting, certainly not in our era when time is galloping at an ever rapid pace.

When people notice something wrong or dysfunctional in any commercial enterprise they immediately question what's happening, call in the experts, make corrections, and mobilize all their forces to address the crisis.

Why can't the Church do the same thing? Why not mobilize all her living forces for a radical *aggiornamento*? Why?

Could it be just sluggishness, cowardice, pride, lack of imagination and creativity, culpable passivity – all in the hope that the Lord will take care of things and that the Church well knows about such things, from its past?

Christ warned us in the Gospel: "The children of darkness are much more adept in managing their affairs than the children of light."

What then must be done?

The Church today has an urgent and demanding need for the three-fold reform.

1. A theological and catechetical reform to rethink the faith and reformulate it in a coherent manner for our contemporaries. A faith that no longer means anything, that does not give meaning to human existence, is simply an ornament, a useless superstructure that falls under its own weight. This is the case today.
2. A pastoral reform that rethinks from top to bottom the structures inherited from the past. (see my suggestions in this matter).
3. A spiritual reform to give new life to the mystical dimension, and a rethinking of the sacraments in view of giving them an existential dimension, and anchoring them to new life. I would have much to say on this.

The Church of today is too formal, too formalistic. One has the impression that the institution stifles charisma and what ultimately counts is external stability, superficial respectability - a kind of façade. Don't we risk seeing ourselves one day treated as "whitened sepulchers" by Jesus?

Conclusion

To conclude, I suggest the calling together, at a universal level, of a general synod in which all Christians participate – Catholics and others – to examine, in all frankness and clarity, the points made here as well as all else that would be proposed. Such a synod, which would last three years, would culminate in a general assembly (let's avoid the term "council") that would bring together the results of this synod and draw some conclusions.

Finally, Most Holy Father, asking you to forgive my frankness and audacity and begging your paternal blessing. Allow me to say that I lived these days I live in your presence, thanks to your remarkable book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, which is the object of my spiritual reading and daily meditation.

Sincerely yours in the Lord,

P. Henri Boulad, sj

ADDENDUM

Rethinking the Church's Pastoral Approach in Today's World

1. Restructuring the parish

Before being a Christian community, the parish, first of all, ought to be a human community; that is, an organic entity that exemplifies a certain number of social relationships as in a large family. This large family once was "the village" where everyone knew everyone else and where the pastor knew everyone personally, his or her past and present history. The pastor then lived the way Jesus described the Good Shepherd: "I know mine and mine know me."

This is possible in a grouping of a hundred people or at best a hundred families. Beyond such a number there is no longer community, but an anonymous group that defies unity and structure.

The parish ceases to be a large family and the pastor can no longer be someone who "knows each one of this flock by name." He becomes an administrator who manages this gathering by the computer, by numbers and statistics with an Internet program. Or he concentrates on a small number of persons to the detriment of the rest.

Our country parishes of former days have changed in their dimension, becoming mega-churches with thousands of faithful. To insist on maintaining the present structure that is inherited from the past is an absurdity.

I believe a parish of ten thousand inhabitants ought to be divided into a hundred mini parishes in order to become communities at a human level. I can already hear the objection: but where are you going to find a hundred priests to serve these new communities when we are having all the trouble in the world to recruit just one priest for the actual parishes? The reply is simple, so very simple.

2. Make an appeal to mature and proven men (*virī probati*) to take over these individual communities and give resident pastor the title of bishop of this new ensemble of parishes. In each group of homes or neighborhood the Church would single out a serious Christian, having proven himself - preferably a retired person in good health, with a decent pension and sufficient leisure time for him to assume the pastoral charge of his community. In these days when we see that people are living longer and retire earlier it would not be hard to find such a person. His human, theological and spiritual formation would be completed through intensive courses for a period of six months. This would also be a period of probation. Once completed, the person would be ordained.

Having accepted such a proposition, he would obviously consult with his wife who in turn would become his right arm and indispensable collaborator in running the parish.

The role of this pastor would consist in getting to know each of the families and each individual personally. This is done by home visitation, celebrating anniversaries, different get-togethers, meetings for reflection and all this through his own initiative and the suggestions of his parishioners.

There would be Eucharistic celebrations in the home as needed, and on Sundays people would gather in a large hall for mass followed by an agape of refreshments.

This priest would be responsible for everyone in his parish – believers and non-believers. Without imposing anything it would be up to him to find the right formula to put everyone at ease. Thus there would be parishes of variable size. This is a challenge that would demand of the pastor tact, a right approach, discretion, flexibility and creativity

Given such a perspective,

3. Married men would be ordained, just as is the case in the Eastern churches, Orthodox and Uniate, and as has been the case for centuries in the rest of Christianity. The practice of celibacy has always been reserved to individuals - monks and religious - who freely chose this lifestyle that supposes a supportive community. It is from these that one would choose the bishops.

But to impose celibacy on all priests without distinction under the pretext that this constitutes for some a valuable and viable path is tempting God. The consequence of this is that there are an impressive number of priests living in concubinage both in Europe and the rest of the world.

Is it not unreasonable to demand that a man, who does not have the calling to celibacy, live year after year in isolation, alone within the walls of his rectory? Didn't God Himself say in the opening pages of the Bible "It is not good for man to live alone"?

The stubbornness of the Western Church in this matter is beyond explanation and is in contradiction with the ancient tradition of the Church. It is about time that the Magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church stop its fidgeting and open the door to a married priesthood in consort with an optional celibate priesthood.

Given the perspective of this pastoral reorganization that I propose,

4. A vocation would be less a calling by God than a direct call by the Church to an individual.

A person would be completely free to accept or refuse this call. Having said this, one must not exclude a direct call; from God to the soul.

A final point.

5. Aside from the geographic parishes I have described, one would also envision parishes that are socially selective; that do not depend so much on where one lives as on one's profession or sphere of interests. Such parishes would be created according to the needs and function of the existing groups of people.

The idea here is to start with a group that is already established and help it pass from a naturally human community to a Christian community. The Christian element should not be superimposed on the already existing community but act as a leaven in the dough to animate it from within.

In conclusion, I would say that the Spirit today calls us to reflect, to invent and innovate: to come out of our preconceived notions and our set categories; to risk a new pastoral approach that responds to the needs of our day. No more timidity, no more caution, no more hesitation. "Fear not" said John-Paul II; "Fear not" say the Lord throughout the Bible.

We must once again find the creativity and boldness of Saint Paul.

Will we remain prisoners of the past forever? Will we know how to invent the future?

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