



The Holy See

***LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO CARDINAL MARC OUELLET
PRESIDENT OF THE PONTIFICAL COMMISSION FOR LATIN AMERICA***

*To His Eminence Cardinal Marc Armand Ouellet, PSS,
President of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America*

Your Eminence,

At the end of the meeting of the Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, I had the opportunity to meet with all those attending the assembly, during which there was an exchange of ideas and impressions concerning the public participation of the laity in the life of our peoples.

Now I would like to recount what was shared in that encounter and to follow it up with a reflection on those days, so that the spirit of discernment and reflection “doesn’t fall into the void”; so that it may help us and continue to encourage us to better serve the faithful Holy People of God.

It is precisely this image from which I would like to begin our reflection on the public activity of the laity in our Latin American context. To evoke the faithful Holy People of God is to evoke the horizon to which we are called to look and reflect. It is the faithful Holy People of God to whom as pastors we are continually called to look, protect, accompany, support and serve. A father cannot conceive of himself without his children. He may be an excellent worker, a professional, a husband or friend, but what makes him a father figure are his children. The same goes for us, we are pastors. A shepherd cannot conceive of himself without his flock, whom he is called to serve. The pastor is pastor of a people, and he serves this people from within. Many times he goes ahead to lead the way, at other times he retraces his steps lest anyone be left behind, and, not infrequently, he stands in the middle to know the pulse of the people.

Looking to the faithful Holy People of God, and feeling ourselves an integral part of the same, places us in life and thus in the themes that we treat, in a different way. This helps us not to fall

into reflections that, in themselves, may be very good but which end up homologizing the life of our people or theorizing to the point that considerations end by prohibiting action. Looking continually at the People of God saves us from certain declarationist nominalisms (slogans) that are fine phrases but that are unable to sustain the life of our communities. For example, I now recall the famous phrase: “the hour of the laity has come”, but it seems the clock has stopped.

Looking at the People of God is remembering that we all enter the Church as lay people. The first sacrament, which seals our identity forever, and of which we should always be proud, is Baptism. Through Baptism and by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, (the faithful) “are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood” (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 10). Our first and fundamental consecration is rooted in our Baptism. No one has been baptized a priest or a bishop. They baptized us as lay people and it is the indelible sign that no one can ever erase. It does us good to remember that the Church is not an elite of priests, of consecrated men, of bishops, but that everyone forms the faithful Holy People of God. To forget this carries many risks and distortions in our own experience, be they personal or communitary, of the ministry that the Church has entrusted to us. We are, as firmly emphasized by the Second Vatican Council, the People of God, whose identity is “the dignity and freedom of the sons of God, in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells as in His temple” (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 9). The faithful Holy People of God is anointed with the grace of the Holy Spirit, and thus, as we reflect, think, evaluate, discern, we must be very attentive to this anointing.

At the same time I must add another element that I consider the fruit of a mistaken way of living out the ecclesiology proposed by Vatican II. We cannot reflect on the theme of the laity while ignoring one of the greatest distortions that Latin America has to confront — and to which I ask you to devote special attention — clericalism. This approach not only nullifies the character of Christians, but also tends to diminish and undervalue the baptismal grace that the Holy Spirit has placed in the heart of our people. Clericalism leads to homologization of the laity; treating the laity as “representative” limits the diverse initiatives and efforts and, dare I say, the necessary boldness to enable the Good News of the Gospel to be brought to all areas of the social and above all political sphere. Clericalism, far from giving impetus to various contributions and proposals, gradually extinguishes the prophetic flame to which the entire Church is called to bear witness in the heart of her peoples. Clericalism forgets that the visibility and sacramentality of the Church belong to all the People of God (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, nn. 9-14), not only to the few chosen and enlightened.

There is a very interesting phenomenon produced in our Latin America that I would like to quote here: I believe it to be one of the few areas in which the People of God is free from the influence of clericalism. I am referring to popular devotion. It has been one of the few areas in which the people (including its pastors) and the Holy Spirit have been able to meet without the clericalism that seeks to control and restrain God’s anointing of his own. We know that popular devotion, as Paul VI aptly wrote in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, “certainly has its limits. It is

often subject to penetration by many distortions of religion”, but, he continued, “if it is well oriented, above all by a pedagogy of evangelization, it is rich in values. It manifests a thirst for God which only the simple and poor can know. It makes people capable of generosity and sacrifice even to the point of heroism, when it is a question of manifesting belief. It involves an acute awareness of profound attributes of God: fatherhood, providence, loving and constant presence. It engenders interior attitudes rarely observed to the same degree elsewhere: patience, the sense of the cross in daily life, detachment, openness to others, devotion. By reason of these aspects, we readily call it ‘popular piety,’ that is, religion of the people, rather than religiosity.... When it is well oriented, this popular religiosity can be more and more for multitudes of our people a true encounter with God in Jesus Christ” (n. 48). Pope Paul VI used an expression that I consider fundamental, the faith of our people, their guidelines, research, aspirations, yearning. When they manage to listen and orient themselves, they are able to manifest a genuine presence of the Spirit. Let us trust in our People, in their memory and in their ‘sense of smell’, let us trust that the Holy Spirit acts in and with our People and that this Spirit is not merely the “property” of the ecclesial hierarchy.

I took this example of popular devotion as a hermeneutic key that can help us to better understand the action that is generated when the faithful Holy People of God pray and act. An action that does not remain tied to the intimate sphere of the person but which, on the contrary, is transformed into culture; “an evangelized popular culture contains values of faith and solidarity capable of encouraging the development of a more just and believing society, and possesses a particular wisdom which ought to be gratefully acknowledged” (*Evangeli Gaudium*, n. 68).

From here then, we can ask ourselves: what does it mean that lay people are working in public life?

Nowadays many of our cities have become true places of survival. Places in which the throw-away culture seems to have taken over, leaving little room for hope. There we find our brothers and sisters, immersed in these struggles, with their families, who seek not only to survive but among the contradictions and injustices, seek the Lord and long to bear witness to him. What does the fact that lay people are working in public life mean for us pastors? It means finding a way to be able to encourage, accompany and inspire all attempts and efforts that are being made today in order to keep hope and faith alive in a world full of contradictions, especially for the poor, especially with the poorest. It means, as pastors, committing ourselves among our people and, with our people, supporting their faith and hope. Opening doors, working with them, dreaming with them, reflecting and above all praying with them. “We need to look at our cities” — and thus all areas where the life of our people unfolds — “with a contemplative gaze, a gaze of faith which sees God dwelling in their homes, in their streets and squares.... He dwells among them, fostering solidarity, fraternity, and the desire for goodness, truth and justice. This presence must not be contrived but found, uncovered. God does not hide himself from those who seek him with a sincere heart” (*Evangeli Gaudium*, n. 71). It is not the pastor to tell lay people what they must do and say, they know this better than we do. It is not the pastor to establish what the faithful must

say in various settings. As pastors, united with our people, it does us good to ask ourselves how we are encouraging and promoting charity and fraternity, the desire for good, for truth and for justice; how we can ensure that corruption does not settle in our hearts.

Often we have given in to the temptation of thinking that committed lay people are those dedicated to the works of the Church and/or the matters of the parish or the diocese, and we have reflected little on how to accompany baptized people in their public and daily life; on how in their daily activities, with the responsibilities they have, they are committed as Christians in public life. Without realizing it, we have generated a lay elite, believing that committed lay people are only those who work in the matters “of priests”, and we have forgotten, overlooked, the believers who very often burn out their hope in the daily struggle to live the faith. These are the situations that clericalism fails to notice, because it is more concerned with dominating spaces than with generating initiatives. Therefore we must recognize that lay people — through their reality, through their identity, for they are immersed in the heart of social, public and political life, participate in cultural forms that are constantly generated — need new forms of organization and of celebration of the faith. The current pace is so different (I do not say better or worse) than what we were living 30 years ago! “This challenges us to imagine innovative spaces and possibilities for prayer and communion which are more attractive and meaningful for city dwellers” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 73). It is illogical and therefore impossible to think that we as pastors should have the monopoly on solutions for the multitude of challenges that contemporary life presents us. On the contrary, we must be on the side of our people, accompanying them in their search and encouraging the imagination capable of responding to the current set of problems. We must do this by discerning with our people and never for our people or without our people. As St Ignatius would say, “in line with the necessities of place, time and person”. In other words, not uniformly. We cannot give general directives in order to organize the People of God within its public life. Inculturation is a process that we pastors are called to inspire, encouraging people to live their faith where and with whom they are. Inculturation is learning to discover how a determinate portion of the people today, in the historical here and now, live, celebrate and proclaim their faith. With a particular identity and on the basis of the problems that must be faced, as well as with all the reasons they have to rejoice. Inculturation is the work of artisans and not of a factory with a production line dedicated to “manufacturing Christian worlds or spaces”.

There are two memories that should be asked to be safeguarded in our people. The memory of Jesus Christ and the memory of our forebears. The faith we have received was a gift that came to us in many cases from the hands of our mothers, from our grandmothers. They were the living memory of Jesus Christ within our homes. It was in the silence of family life that most of us learned to pray, to love, to live the faith. It was within family life, which then took on the shape of parish, school, community, that the faith came into our life and became flesh. It was this simple faith that accompanied us often in the many vicissitudes of the journey. To lose our memory is to uproot ourselves from where we came and therefore is also not even knowing where we are going. This is fundamental, when we uproot a lay person from his faith, from that of his origins;

when we uproot him from the faithful Holy People of God, we uproot him from his baptismal identity and thus we deprive him of the grace of the Holy Spirit. The same happens to us when we uproot ourselves as pastors from our people, we become lost. Our role, our joy, a pastor's joy, lies precisely in helping and in encouraging, as many have done before us: mothers, grandmothers and fathers, history's real protagonists. Not through our concession of good will, but by right and actual statute. Lay people are part of the faithful Holy People of God and thus are the protagonists of the Church and of the world; we are called to serve them, not to be served by them.

In my recent journey on Mexican soil, I had the opportunity to be alone with our Mother, allowing myself to be looked at by her. In that space of prayer, I was also able to present my filial heart to her. In that moment you too were there with your communities. In that moment of prayer, I asked that Mary never cease to support, as she did with the first community, the faith of our people. May the Blessed Virgin intercede for you, protect you and accompany you always!

From the Vatican, 19 March 2016

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