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Letter of the Holy Father on the renewal of the study of Church history

The following is the Letter of the Holy Father Francis on the renewal of the study of Church history:

Letter of the Holy Father

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the present letter, I would like to share some thoughts on the importance of the study of Church history, particularly in order to help priests better interpret the world in which we live. This is a question that I would like to see taken into consideration in the training of new priests and others engaged in pastoral work.

I am well aware that, in the formation of candidates for the priesthood, a good deal of attention is devoted to the study of Church history, as is only right and proper. What I would like to emphasize here is the importance of developing a *genuine sense of history* in young students of theology. By this, I mean not only a solid and detailed knowledge of major events in the past twenty centuries of Christianity, but also and above all, the cultivation of a clear sense of the historical dimension that is ours as human beings. No one can truly know their deepest identity, or what they wish to be in the future, without attending to the bonds that link them to preceding generations. This is true not only of us as individuals, but also as a community. Indeed, the study and writing of history helps to keep “the flame of collective conscience” alive.[1] Otherwise, all that remains is the personal memory of facts bound to our own interests or sensibilities, with no real connection to the human and ecclesial community in which we live.

A proper sense of history can help each of us to develop a better sense of proportion and perspective in coming to understand reality as it is and not as we imagine it or would prefer reality to be. Setting aside dangerous and disembodied abstractions, we are able to relate to reality as it summons us to ethical responsibility, sharing and solidarity.

According to an oral tradition whose written source I cannot confirm, a great French theologian used to tell his

students that the study of history protects us from “ecclesiological monophysitism”, that is, from an overly angelic conception of the Church, presenting a Church that is unreal because she lacks spots and wrinkles. Indeed the Church, like our own mothers, must be loved as she is; otherwise we do not love her at all, or what we love is only a figment of our imagination. Church history helps us to see the real Church and to love the Church as she truly exists, and love what she has learnt and continues to learn from her mistakes and failures. A Church that even in her darkest moments is conscious of her deepest identity can be capable of understanding the imperfect and wounded world in which she lives. In her efforts to bring healing and renewal to the world, she will use the same means by which she strives to heal and renew herself, even if she at times does not succeed.

This can serve as a corrective to the misguided approach that would view reality only from a triumphalist defence of our function or role. As I pointed out in the Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti*, that is precisely the approach that sees the injured man in the parable of the Good Samaritan as a distraction, irrelevant to the important things in life, a “nobody”. [2]

The need to cultivate a sense of history in candidates for the priesthood should appear obvious, and even more so in our time, when “there is a growing loss of the sense of history, which leads to further breakup. A kind of ‘deconstructionism’, whereby human freedom claims to create everything starting from zero, is making headway in today’s culture. The one thing it leaves in its wake is the drive to limitless consumption and expressions of empty individualism”. [3]

The importance of a connection to history

More generally, it must be said that all of us – not just candidates for the priesthood – need a renewed sense of history. In this context, I have made the following observation. “If someone tells young people to ignore their history, to reject the experiences of their elders, to look down on the past and to look forward to a future that he holds out, doesn’t it then become easy to draw them along so that they only do what he tells them? He needs the young to be shallow, uprooted and distrustful, so that they can trust only in his promises and act according to his plans. That is how various ideologies operate: they destroy (or deconstruct) all differences so that they can reign unopposed. To do so, however, they need young people who have no use for history, who spurn the spiritual and human riches inherited from past generations, and are ignorant of everything that came before them”. [4]

In order to grasp reality, it must be approached from a *diachronic* perspective, whereas the prevailing tendency is to see things from a flattened *synchronic* point of view: a present without a past. The avoidance of history very often appears as a form of blindness that drives us to waste our energies on a world that does not exist, raising false problems and veering towards inadequate solutions. Some of these interpretations may prove useful to small groups but certainly not to humanity and the Christian community as a whole.

Hence the urgent need for a greater sense of history at a moment when we see a tendency to dismiss the memory of the past or to invent one suited to the requirements of dominant ideologies. Faced with the cancellation of past history or with clearly biased historical narratives, the work of historians, together with knowledge and dissemination of their work, can act as a curb on misrepresentations, partisan efforts at revisionism, and their use to justify wars, persecutions, the production, sale, and utilization of weapons and any number of other evils.

Nowadays we are flooded with “memories”, often false, artificial and even mendacious, and at the same time an absence of history and historical awareness in civil society and even in our Christian communities. Matters become even worse if we think of carefully and covertly prefabricated histories that serve to construct *ad hoc* memories, identity-based memories and exclusionary memories. The work of historians and knowledge of their findings are of decisive importance today and can serve as an antidote to this lethal regime of hatred that rests on ignorance and prejudice.

On the other hand, an in-depth, participatory knowledge of history makes clear that we cannot come to grips with the past by hasty interpretations disconnected from their consequences. Reality, past or present, is never a

simple phenomenon reducible to naive and dangerous simplifications. Much less to the attempts of those who believe they are like perfect and omnipotent gods and want to cancel part of history and humanity. There may well be horrific moments and atrocious individuals in humanity, but if judgements are made primarily through mass communication and social media, or on the basis of purely political interest, we can be subject to an irrational rush of anger or emotion. In the end, as the saying goes, "Facts taken out of context can only serve as a pretext". This is where the study of history comes to our aid. Historians can contribute to the understanding of complexity through the rigorous method they employ in interpreting the past. An understanding that is indispensable for transforming the present world and transcending ideological distortions.[5]

The memory of the whole truth

Let us recall the genealogy of Jesus narrated by Saint Matthew. Nothing is simplified, erased or invented. The Lord's genealogy consists of the true story that includes a number of figures who are problematic to say the least, and the sin of King David is also emphasised (cf. *Mt* 1:6). Yet, everything culminates with Mary and Christ (cf. *Mt* 1:16).

If this took place in the history of salvation, it can likewise happen in the history of the Church: "Sometimes after a successful start she has cause to mourn a setback, or she may linger in a state of semi-fulfilment and insufficiency".[6] Moreover, "she is by no means unaware that down through the centuries there have been among her members, both clerical and lay, some who were disloyal to the Spirit of God. Today as well, the Church is not blind to the discrepancy between the message she proclaims and the human weakness of those to whom the Gospel has been entrusted. Whatever is history's judgement on these shortcomings, we cannot ignore them and we must combat them assiduously, lest they hinder the spread of the Gospel. The Church also realizes how much she needs the maturing influence of centuries of past experience in order to work out her relationship to the world".[7]

A sincere and courageous study of history, then, helps the Church to understand better her relations with different peoples, and these efforts must assist in interpreting and making clear the most difficult and perplexing moments of these peoples. We must not ask people to forget, indeed "we cannot allow present and future generations to lose the memory of what happened... It is a memory that ensures and encourages the building of a more fair and fraternal future".[8] For this reason, I insist that, "The *Shoah* should not be forgotten... Nor must we forget the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki... Neither must we forget the persecutions, the slave trade and the ethnic killings that continue in various countries, as well as the many other historical events that make us ashamed of our humanity. They need to be remembered, always and ever anew. We must never grow accustomed or inured to them... Nowadays, it is easy to be tempted to turn the page, to say that all these things happened long ago and we should look to the future. For God's sake, no! We can never move forward without remembering the past; we do not progress without an honest and unclouded memory... I think not only of the need to remember the atrocities, but also all those who, amid such great inhumanity and corruption, retained their dignity and, with gestures small or large, chose the part of solidarity, forgiveness and fraternity. To remember goodness is also a healthy thing... Forgiving does not mean forgetting... In the face of something that cannot be forgotten for any reason, we can still forgive".[9]

Together with memory, the search for historical truth is necessary to allow the Church to initiate – and help initiate in society – sincere and effective paths of reconciliation and social peace: "Those who were fierce enemies have to speak from the stark and clear truth. They have to learn how to cultivate a penitential memory, one that can accept the past in order not to cloud the future with their own regrets, problems and plans. Only by basing themselves on the historical truth of events will they be able to make a broad and persevering effort to understand one another and to strive for a new synthesis for the good of all".[10]

The study of Church history

I would now like to add a few brief observations regarding the study of Church history.

The first observation concerns the risk that such study might take a purely chronological approach or that of a

mistaken apologetics, which would transform the history of the Church into a mere buttress for the history of theology or spirituality of past centuries. This would be a way of studying and consequently teaching Church history that does not promote that sense of history that I mentioned at the beginning.

The second observation addresses the fact that Church history, as it is taught throughout the world, seems to suffer from an overarching reductionism. Here, history is treated as a secondary topic within theology, resulting in a form of theology that ultimately shows itself incapable of truly entering into dialogue with the profound and existential reality of the men and women of our time. This is so because Church history, taught as part of theology, cannot be disconnected from the history of societies.

The third observation takes into account the fact that, in the training of future priests, we see that their formation is still inadequate with regard to the sources. For example, students are rarely formed in how to read the fundamental texts of ancient Christianity such as the *Letter to Diognetus*, the *Didache* or the *Acts of the Martyrs*. When this happens, students will be ill-equipped to read them and resort instead to ideological filters or theoretical pre-conceptions that do not permit a lively and stimulating understanding.

A fourth observation concerns the importance of “doing Church history” – as well as “doing theology” – not only with rigour and precision, but also with passion and engagement. What is needed is a personal and collective passion, an engagement proper to those who are committed to evangelization, and who have not chosen a neutral or sterile position. This stems from the love they have for the Church. They welcome her as Mother and as she is.

A further observation, connected to the previous one, touches on the link between Church history and ecclesiology. Historical research has an indispensable contribution to make in the development of an ecclesiology that is both truly historical and mysterious.[11]

The penultimate observation, which is very close to my heart, concerns the “cancelling” of insights from those whose voices were not able to make themselves heard over the centuries. This makes faithful historical reconstruction a difficult task. Here, I ask myself: is it not a privilege for the Church historian to bring to light as much as possible the popular faces of the “least important” and to reconstruct the history of their defeats and the oppressions they suffered, together with their human and spiritual riches, offering tools for understanding today’s phenomena of marginalization and exclusion?

In my final observation, I would like to recall that Church history can help to recover the entire experience of martyrdom, in the knowledge that there is no history of the Church without martyrdom and that we should never lose this precious memory. Even in the history of her sufferings, “the Church herself also recognizes that she has benefited and is still benefiting from the opposition of her enemies and persecutors”.[12] Precisely where the Church has not triumphed in the eyes of the world is when she has attained her greatest beauty.

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In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that what we are referring to is *study*, not gossip, superficial readings or the “cut and paste” of Internet summaries. Today, many people “pressure us to pursue success without cost, discrediting sacrifice and promoting the idea that study is of no use if it does not immediately produce concrete results. On the contrary, study serves to ask questions, not to be numbed by banality and to seek meaning in life. Moreover, study should enable us to reclaim the right to reject today’s many seductive voices that distract us from this search... This is your great task: to respond to the paralyzing litany of cultural consumerism through dynamic and strong choices, through sharing, knowledge and research”.[13]

Fraternally,

FRANCIS

Given in Rome, at Saint John Lateran, on 21 November in the year 2024, the twelfth of my Pontificate. Memorial of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary

[1] Cf. *Message for the 2020 World Day of Peace*, 1 January 2020 (8 December 2019), 2: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 13 December 2019, p. 8.

[2] Cf. Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti*, 101.

[3] *Ibid.*, 13.

[4] Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit* (25 March 2019), 181.

[5] Cf. Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti*, 116, 164-165

[6] SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity *Ad Gentes*, 6

[7] SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 43

[8] *Address at the Peace Memorial, Hiroshima, Japan* (24 November 2019): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 25-26 November 2019, p. 8

[9] Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti*, 247, 248, 249, 250.

[10] *Ibid.*, 226.

[11] Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 1

[12] SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 44

[13] *Address at the Meeting with Students and the Academic World in Piazza San Domenico in Bologna* (1 October 2017): AAS 109 (2017), 1115
