

LETTER OF THE HOLY FATHER FRANCIS TO THE PILGRIM PEOPLE OF GOD IN GERMANY

Dear brothers and sisters,

It was meditation on the readings of the Acts of the Apostles during the Easter season that led me to write this letter to you. In those readings we meet the first apostolic community imbued with the new life which the Spirit has given them, transforming every circumstance into a moment ripe for proclamation. The members of the community had lost everything and in the morning of the first day of the week find themselves between desolation and bitterness. But then they hear from the mouth of a woman that the Lord is alive. Nothing and no one could stop the paschal irruption into their lives, and they could not be silent about what their eyes had seen and their hands had touched (cf 1 John 1:1).

In this situation and convinced that the Lord “with his newness can always renew our life and our community” [1], I want to draw closer to you, sharing your concern for the future of the Church in Germany.

We know that we live not only in an era of change but in a change of era, stirring new and old questions which it is right and necessary to address. These are questions which I have discussed with your pastors on the last *Ad Limina* visit and which no doubt continue to resonate in your communities. As I did then, I would like to offer my support, to come closer to walk by your side and to help in the search to respond with *parrhesia* to the present situation.

1. With gratitude I look to the widespread network of communities, parishes, chapels, schools, hospitals, social structures which you have created through history and which are a testimony to the living faith that sustained all these, nourished them and enlivened them through many generations. This is a faith that has known times of suffering, confrontation and tribulation, but also of constancy and vitality and which is still today wonderfully fruitful in so many witnesses of life and works of charity. The German Catholic communities, in their number and diversity, are recognised all over the world for their sense of co-responsibility and a generosity that has reached out and accompanied the first stages of evangelisation in regions that struggle to survive and lack resources. This generosity has shown itself in recent history not only as economic and material aid, but also by sharing through the years so many charisms and persons: priests, religious and laity who have faithfully and tirelessly carried out their service and their mission in often difficult situations [2]. They have given the universal Church many great saints and theologians, as well as pastors and lay people who have helped to ensure that the encounter between the Gospel and cultures could achieve new syntheses capable of awakening the best of both [3] and to be offered to the new generations with the ardour of the beginnings. This demanded great effort to identify pastoral responses to the challenges they faced.

It is worth noting the ecumenical journey all these initiatives are undertaking, the fruits of which we saw during the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. This is a path that allows us to encourage requests for prayer, cultural exchange and the exercise of

charity, that is capable of overcoming the prejudices and wounds of the past, that allows us to celebrate and bear witness to the joy of the Gospel.

2. Today, however, I agree with you on the pain of seeing the increasing erosion and decay of faith, with all that this entails spiritually as well as socially and culturally. Such a situation is evident, as Benedict XVI pointed out, not only “in the East, where, as we know, the majority of the population is not baptised and has no contact with the Church and often does not know at all either Christ or the Church” [4], but also in the so-called “regions of Catholic tradition [where there is] a very strong decline in participation in Sunday Mass, as well as in sacramental life” [5]. It is a multifaceted deterioration, not easy or quick to solve, which calls for a serious and well-informed approach that urges us to become, on the threshold of a new era, like the beggar in Acts, listening to the words of the Apostle: “I have neither silver nor silver gold, but what I have I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ, the Nazarene, walk!” (3: 6).

3. To address this situation, your pastors have proposed a synodal journey. What it actually means and how it will develop is something that is undoubtedly still being considered. For my part I expressed my reflections on the synodality of the Church on the occasion of the celebration of the fifty years of the Synod of Bishops [6]. In essence it is a *synodos* under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that is, walking together and with the whole Church under the Spirit’s light and guidance, to be invaded by the Spirit, to learn to listen and discern the ever new horizon that is always on offer. Synodality presupposes and requires the irruption of the Holy Spirit.

In the recent plenary assembly of the Italian Bishops I had the opportunity to reaffirm this central reality for the life of the Church by bringing into focus the double perspective that it entails: “Synodality from the bottom up, that is the need to take care of the life and good functioning of the diocese: the councils, the parishes, the involvement of the laity ... (cf CCC 469-494), to begin with the dioceses: one cannot make a great synod without going to the base ...; and then synodality from the top down”, which makes it possible to live in a specific and singular way the collegial dimension of the episcopal ministry and of ecclesial life [7]. Only in this way can we come to and take decisions on issues essential to the faith and life of the Church. This will indeed be possible if we decide to walk together with patience, anointed by the Spirit and in the humble and healthy conviction that we will never be able to answer all the questions and problems at the one time. The Church is and will always be a pilgrim in history, the bearer of a treasure in clay vessels (cf 2 Cor 4:7). This reminds us that the Church will never be perfect in this world and that her vitality and beauty lie in the treasure of which she is by her very nature the bearer [8].

The present questions, as well as the answers we give, demand “a long fermentation of life and the collaboration of a whole people for years” [9] if there is to be a right and healthy response. This means setting in motion and implementing processes that build us up as the People of God rather than looking for immediate results that produce quick and media-pleasing consequences that do not last because they lack maturity or because they do not correspond to the vocation which is ours.

4. Absorbed by serious and necessary analyses, one can succumb to subtle temptations to which I think we have to attend, since, far from helping us to walk together, they will keep us clinging to and imprisoned in recurring patterns and practices that will end up distorting or limiting our mission. Or made worse by the fact that we are not aware of it, we may end up

caught in a complicated play of arguments, expositions and resolutions that will only take us away from real and daily contact with the faithful people and the Lord.

5. Accepting and enduring the current situation does not imply passivity or resignation, still less negligence. On the contrary, it presumes an invitation to identify what in us and in our communities is death-dealing and needs to be evangelised and visited by the Lord. This requires courage, because what we need is much more than a structural, organisational or functional change.

I remember that in the meeting I had with your pastors in 2015 I told them that one of the first and greatest temptations in the Church was to believe that the solutions to current and future problems would come only from purely structural or bureaucratic reforms, but that, at the end of the day, they would not have touched the vital nuclei that need attention. “It is a sort of new Pelagianism, which leads us to place trust in administrative structures, in perfect organisations. Excessive centralisation, rather than helping, complicates the life of the Church and its missionary dynamic (cf *Evangelii Gaudium*, 32)”. [10]

At the heart of this temptation there is the thought that, faced with so many problems and shortcomings, the best response would be to reorganise things, make changes and indulge in “mending” in order to adapt the life of the Church to the prevailing logic or the logic of a particular group.

Following this path, it could seem that everything will be resolved and things will be redirected if the Church’s life enters into a “determined” new and ancient order that does away with the tensions of our human existence and those that the Gospel itself wants to create. [11]

Following this path, the Church’s life could eliminate tensions, be “in order and in tune”, but it would only mean that the Church over time would fall asleep and the heart of our people would be tamed and would shrink, until the vital and evangelical force that the Spirit wants to give falls silent”. This would be the great sin of worldliness and of the anti-evangelical worldly spirit”. [12] There would be a good, well-organised and even “modernised” Church, but with no soul or Gospel newness. We would live a vapid Christianity with no evangelical flavour. [13] “Today we are called to manage the imbalance. We cannot do something good, evangelical if we are afraid of imbalance”. [14] We cannot forget that there are certain tensions and imbalances that have the flavour of the Gospel and that it is essential to keep because they announce a new life.

6. This is why it seems important to me not to lose sight of what “the Church has taught many times: that we are not justified by our works or our efforts, but by the grace of the Lord who takes the initiative”. [15] Without this theological dimension, in the various new initiatives and proposals that will be implemented, we will repeat what today is preventing the Church from announcing the merciful love of the Lord. The way in which the current situation will be faced will determine the fruits that will emerge later. For this reason I ask that it be done in a theological key so that the Gospel of grace, with the irruption of the Holy Spirit, may be your light and guide as you face these challenges. Whenever the Church has tried to resolve her problems alone, trusting and focusing solely on her own strengths or methods, on her intelligence, will or prestige, she has ended up increasing and perpetuating the very evils she has sought to overcome. Forgiveness and salvation are not something we must buy or “which we should acquire by our works or our efforts. He forgives us and frees us without charge.

His giving of himself on the Cross is something so great that we cannot and must not pay for it. We must only welcome it with immense gratitude and with the joy of being loved so much more than we can imagine". [16]

The present situation cannot cause us to lose sight of the fact that our mission is not based on encouraging or discouraging forecasts, calculations or enquiries, either at the ecclesial level or at the political, economic or social level - nor even on the positive results of our pastoral plans. [17] It is important to value these things, to listen to them, reflect on them and pay attention to them; but in themselves they do not exhaust our life of faith. Our mission and *raison d'être* consist in the fact that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life" (John 3:16). "Without a new life and an authentic evangelical spirit, without 'the Church's fidelity to her vocation', any new structure is corrupted in a short time". [18]

Therefore the transformation required cannot come only in reaction to data or external needs, such as the sharp drop in births and the aging of the communities, which do not allow us to see generational change. Objective and valid concerns, when seen in isolation, outside the mystery of the Church, would favour and foster a reactive attitude (both positive and negative) in the face of problems. True transformation responds to needs arising from our life of faith and from the evangelizing dynamic of the Church. It requires pastoral conversion. We need an attitude that, by trying to live and reveal the Gospel, breaks with "the grey pragmatism of the daily life of the Church, in which all appears to proceed normally, while in reality faith is wearing down and degenerating into small-mindedness". [19] Pastoral conversion reminds us that evangelisation must be our guiding criterion *par excellence*, on the basis of which we discern all the steps we are called to take as an ecclesial community. Evangelisation is the essential mission of the Church. [20]

7. It is therefore necessary, as your pastors have pointed out, to reassert the primacy of evangelisation in order to look to the future with trust and hope because "evangelising, the Church begins by evangelising herself. A community of believers, a community of lived and shared hope, a community of fraternal love, she needs to listen constantly to what she must believe, the reasons for her hope, the new commandment of love". [21]

Lived in this way, evangelisation is not a tactic of ecclesial repositioning in today's world or an act of conquest, domination or territorial expansion. It is not even a "retouch" which adapts the Church to the spirit of the time but makes her lose her originality and prophetic identity. Nor is it the quest to recover habits or practices that made sense in another cultural context. No. Evangelisation is a path of discipleship, of response and conversion in love to the One who loved us first (cf 1 John 4:19); a journey that enables a faith lived, experienced, celebrated and witnessed with joy. Evangelisation leads us to recover the joy of the Gospel, the joy of being Christian.

There is no doubt that these are hard times, times of the Cross, but nothing can destroy the supernatural joy, which adapts, transforms and never ceases to be an explosion of light that comes from the personal certainty of being infinitely loved, beyond all else. Evangelisation generates inner security, a hope-filled serenity that brings its own satisfaction.

8. This is why our main concern must focus on sharing this joy by opening up and meeting our brothers and sisters, especially those who are abandoned on the steps of our churches, on the streets, in prisons and hospitals, squares and cities. The Lord was clear: "Seek first the

kingdom and the righteousness of God, and all these things will be given to you” (Matt 6:33). To go out to anoint with the Spirit of Christ every earthly reality, at every crossroad, above all “where new narratives and paradigms are being formed, bringing the word of Jesus to the inmost soul of our cities”. [24]

Help to ensure that the Passion of Christ touches in a real and concrete way the many passions and situations in which his face still suffers because of sin and evil. His is a Passion that can unmask the old and new slaveries that destroy men and women, especially today when we see xenophobia being reborn, and that promote a culture based on indifference and rejection, as well as individualism and expulsion. In turn, may the Lord’s Passion awaken in our communities and above all among the youngest the passion for his Kingdom.

This asks us to “acquire the spiritual taste for remaining close to people’s lives, to the point of discovering that this becomes the source of a greater joy. Mission is a passion for Jesus but, at the same time, it is a passion for his people”. [25]

We should therefore ask ourselves what the Spirit is saying today to the Church (Apoc 2:7), in order to recognise the signs of the times, [26] which is not the same as simply adapting to the spirit of the times (cf Rom 12:2). All these dynamics of listening, reflection and discernment have as their objective to make the Church more faithful every day, more available, agile and transparent, in order to proclaim the joy of the Gospel, on the basis of which all questions can be slowly discovered and answered.[27] The challenges are there to be overcome. We must be realistic but without losing the joy, the audacity and the hope-filled dedication. “Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary enthusiasm!”[28]

9. The Second Vatican Council marked an important step in the Church’s understanding of both herself and her mission in the contemporary world. This journey, begun more than fifty years ago, continues to spur us on in its reception and development, and it has not yet come to an end, above all with respect to the synodality that must be implemented at the different levels of Church life (in parish and diocese, at the national level, in the universal Church, as well as in the various congregations and communities). This process, especially in these times which tend strongly to fragmentation and polarisation, requires that we ensure that the *sensus ecclesiae* inspires every decision we take and is nurtured at every level. It is a matter of living and feeling with the Church and in the Church, which, in many situations, will also lead us to suffer in the Church and with the Church. The universal Church lives in and of the particular Churches, [29] just as the particular Churches live and flourish in and from the universal Church. If they find themselves separated from the entire ecclesial body, they weaken, rot and die. Hence the need always to ensure that communion with the whole body of the Church is alive and effective. This helps us overcome the anxiety that shuts us in upon ourselves and our idiosyncrasies. It enables us, beyond all that seems to prevent it, to look into the eyes of, to listen to and to accompany those who are on the side of the road. This can sometimes be seen in a small gesture, like the father of the prodigal son, who leaves the doors open so that, when he returns, the son can enter without difficulty. [30] This is not the same as refusing to walk, to move forward, to change; nor does it mean arguing or disagreeing. It is simply the consequence of knowing ourselves part of a larger body that wants us, waits for us and needs us, and that we too want and wait for and need. It is the delight of feeling ourselves part of the holy People of God, faithful and patient.

The challenges we face, the different questions to be addressed cannot be ignored or concealed: they must be faced, but without being trapped in them, losing perspective,

shrinking the horizon and fragmenting reality. “When we stop in the conflicting situation, we lose the sense of the profound unity of reality”. [31] The *sensus ecclesiae* provides a broad horizon of possibilities, from which we may answer urgent questions and also puts before us the beauty of the multiform face of the Church. [32] The Church has a multiform face not only because of her spatial spread in all peoples, races and cultures, [33] but also from her temporal reality which allows us to immerse ourselves in the wellsprings of the absolute.

10. Therefore watch and be attentive in the face of every temptation that leads to reducing the People of God to an enlightened group, which does not allow us to see, taste and give thanks for an overflowing holiness found “in the patient People of God: in the parents whose children grow so lovingly, in the men and women who work to bring bread home, to the sick, to the elderly women who continue to smile ... In this constancy to go on day after day I see the sanctity of the militant Church. This is so often the holiness “of next door”, of those who live near us and are a reflection of the presence of God”. [38] This is the sanctity that protects and has always safeguarded the Church from any empiricist ideological reduction or manipulation. It is a holiness that evokes, recalls and invites us to develop that Marian style in the missionary activity of the Church, capable of joining justice to mercy, contemplation to action, tenderness to conviction. “Because every time we look at Mary we believe once again in the revolutionary force of tenderness and affection. In her we see that humility and tenderness are not virtues of the weak but of the strong, who do not need to abuse others to feel important”. [39]

In my native land, there is a suggestive and powerful saying that can offer some light: “The brothers should be united because this is the first law; let them be truly united at all times because if they struggle among them those outside will devour them” [40] Brothers and sisters, let us take care of each other and guard against the temptations of the father of lies and division, the master of separation who, prompting the search for an apparent good or response to a given situation, ends up fragmenting the body of the holy faithful people of God. As an apostolic body, we walk and we walk together, listening to each other under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, even if we do not think in the same way, starting from the wise conviction that “the Church tends unceasingly over the centuries to the fullness of divine truth, until the words of God come to their fulfilment in her”. [41]

11. A synodal perspective does not do away with conflicts or perplexities, nor do conflicts remain subordinate to syncretistic resolutions of “good consensus” or resulting from the elaboration of censuses or investigations on this or that theme. This would be very reductive. Synodality has evangelisation and the *sensus ecclesiae* as its background and heart. These are determinant elements of our ecclesial DNA and demand that we consciously assume a way of being Church in which “the whole is greater than the part, but it is also greater than the sum of its parts. There is no need, then, to be overly obsessed with limited and particular questions. We constantly have to broaden our horizons and see the greater good which will benefit us all. But this has to be done without evasion or uprooting. We need to sink our roots deeper into the fertile soil and history of our native place, which is a gift of God. We can work on a small scale, in our own neighbourhood, but with a larger perspective”. [42]

12. This requires of all the People of God, and especially the pastors, a state of wakefulness and conversion that allows these realities to be kept alive and active. Wakefulness and conversion are gifts that only the Lord can give us. It is enough for us to ask for his grace through prayer and fasting. It has always struck me how, during his life, especially in moments of great decisions, the Lord was particularly tempted. Prayer and fasting had a

special place in determining all his subsequent actions (cf Matt 4: 1-11). Synodality cannot escape this logic and must always be accompanied by the grace of conversion, so that our personal and communal work may increasingly represent and resemble that of the *kenosis* of Christ (cf Phil 2:1-11). Speaking, acting, and responding as the Body of Christ also means speaking and acting in the manner of Christ, with his own feelings, practices and priorities. Therefore, following the example of the Master who “stripped himself, assuming the condition of a servant” (Phil 2: 7), the grace of conversion frees us from false and sterile protagonisms, distances us from the temptation to remain in protected and easy positions and invites us to go to the edge of the city to meet and listen to the Lord better. This attitude of *kenosis* also allows us to experience the unfailingly rich and creative force of hope that comes from the evangelical poverty to which we are called and which makes us free to evangelise and witness. Thus we will allow the Spirit to refresh and renew our life, freeing us from the slavery, inertia and comforts that prevent us from walking and especially from worshipping. Because in adoring human beings fulfil their supreme duty and are able to glimpse the future light, the light that helps us to taste the new creation. [43]

Without this dimension, we run the risk of starting from ourselves and from the anxiety of self-justification and self-preservation that will lead us to make changes and adjustments which go only halfway. Far from solving problems, these will end up trapping us in an endless spiral that kills and suffocates the beautiful, promising and liberating proclamation that is ours and that gives meaning to our life: Jesus Christ is Lord. We need prayer, penance and adoration that enable us to say like the publican: "O God, have mercy on me a sinner" (Luke 18:13) – not as a naive, childish or pusillanimous attitude but with the courage to open the door and see what is normally concealed by superficiality, by a culture of well-being and appearance. [44]

These attitudes and true spiritual medicines (prayer, penance and adoration) will allow us to experience again that being a Christian is to know ourselves blessed and to be therefore bearers of bliss for others. To be a Christian is to belong to the Church of the Beatitudes, for the blessed of today: the poor, those who are hungry, those who weep, are hated, excluded and insulted (cf Luke 6:20-23). Let us not forget that “In the Beatitudes the Lord shows us the way. Walking that way, we human beings can reach the most authentically human and divine happiness ... Finally, the Beatitudes are the mirror in which to look at ourselves, which lets us know if we are walking on the right path, a mirror which does not lie”. [45]

13. Dear brothers and sisters, I know of your constancy and of what you have suffered and suffer, without failing, for the name of the Lord. I also know of your desire to revive in the Church the first love (cf Apoc 2:1-5) with the strength of the Spirit, who does not break the cracked vessel nor extinguish the wick that dimly burns (cf Isa 42:3). The Spirit nourishes and vivifies our people and allows the best in them to flourish. I want to walk and to walk by your side, in the certainty that, if the Lord has deemed us worthy to live in this moment, he did not do it to condemn us to death nor to paralyse us in the face of the challenges, but to ensure that his Word, once again, provokes and makes the heart burn as it did for your fathers and mothers, so that your children may see visions and your old people dream prophetic dreams (cf John 3:1). The Lord’s love allows us to raise our heads and start over, with a tenderness which never disappoints, but is always capable of restoring our joy, he makes it possible for us to lift up our heads and to start anew. Let us not flee from the resurrection of Jesus, let us never give up, come what will. May nothing inspire more than his life, which impels us onwards!” [46]

Please do not forget to pray for me.

FRANCIS

29 June 2019

[1] *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 11.

[2] Cf. Benedict XVI, *Incontro con i Vescovi della Germania*, Colonia, 21 agosto 2005.

[3] Cfr. *Gaudium et spes*, 58.

[4] Benedict XVI, *Incontro con i Vescovi della Germania*, Colonia, 21 agosto 2005.

[5] Francis, *Visita ad Limina*, 20 novembre 2015.

[6] Cf. *Episcopalis communio*, 2018.

[7] *Lumen gentium*, n. 23; *Christus Dominus*, n. 3. Citando la Commissione Teologica Internazionale nella sua pubblicazione *La sinodalità nella vita e missione della Chiesa, ho detto ai vescovi italiani*: «la collegialità, pertanto, è la forma specifica in cui la sinodalità ecclesiale si manifesta e si realizza attraverso il ministero dei Vescovi sul livello della comunione tra le Chiese particolari in una regione e sul livello della comunione tra tutte le Chiese nella Chiesa universale. Ogni autentica manifestazione di sinodalità esige per sua natura l'esercizio del ministero collegiale dei Vescovi»

[8] Cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 8.

[9] Yves Congar, *Vera e falsa riforma nella Chiesa*, p. 259.

[10] Francis, *Visita ad Limina*, 20 novembre 2015.

[11] Alla fine è la logica del paradigma tecnocratico a imporsi in tutte le decisioni, relazioni e momenti di rilievo della nostra vita (cfr. *Laudato si'*, nn. 106-114). Logica che, pertanto, condiziona anche il nostro modo di pensare, sentire e amare il Signore e gli altri.

[12] Francis, *Convegno delle Diocesi di Roma*, maggio 2019.

[13] «Dio ci liberi da una Chiesa mondana sotto drappaggi spirituali o pastorali! Questa mondanità asfissiante si sana assaporando l'aria pura dello Spirito Santo, che ci libera dal rimanere centrati in noi stessi, nascosti in un'apparenza religiosa vuota di Dio. Non lasciamoci rubare il Vangelo!» *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 97.

[14] *idem*.

[15] *Gaudete et exsultate*, n. 52.

[16] *Christus vivit*, n. 121.

[17] Atteggiamento che scatenerrebbe uno spirito di “ansia di successo” quando il vento è favorevole e di “vittimismo” quando “bisogna remare con il vento contrario”. Logiche che non appartengono allo spirito evangelico e rivelano un’esperienza elitista della fede. Né “ansia di successo” né “vittimismo”, il cristiano è la persona della gratitudine.

[18] *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 26.

[19] *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 83.

[20] Cf. *Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 14.

[21] *Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 15.

[22] Cf. *Gaudete et exsultate*, n. 125.

[23] *Gaudete et exsultate*, n. 126.

[24] *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 74.

[25] *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 268.

[26] Cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n.4; n.11.

[27] Cf. *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 21.

[28] *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 109.

[29] *Lumen gentium*, n. 23.

[30] Cf. *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 46.

[31] *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 226.

[32] Cf. *Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 40.

[33] Cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 13.

[34] Gustav Mahler: «La tradizione è la salvaguardia del futuro e non la conservazione delle ceneri».

[35] Cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 12.

[36] *Lumen gentium*, n. 12.

[37] Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *El Dios de Jesucristo*, Salamanca 1979, pp. 104-105.

[38] *Gaudete et exsultate*, n. 4.

[39] *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 283.

[40] José Hernández, *Martín Fierro*.

[41] *Dei verbum*, n. 8.

[42] *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 235.

[43] Cf. Romano Guardini, *Pequeña Suma Teológica*, Madrid 1963, pp. 27-33

[44] Cf. Jorge Mario Bergoglio, *Sobre la acusación de sí*, 2.

[45] Francis, *Convegno a Firenze*, 2015.

[46] *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 3.