



The Holy See

LETTER OF THE HOLY FATHER FRANCIS TO HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL REINHARD MARX

Santa Marta, 10 June 2021

Dear brother,

First of all, thank you for your courage. It is a Christian courage that is not afraid of the cross, and that is not afraid to humble itself in the face of the terrible reality of sin. This is what the Lord did (*Phil 2: 5-8*). It is a grace that the Lord has given you, and I see that you wish to accept it and keep it so that it bears fruit. Thank you.

You tell me that you are going through a moment of crisis, and not only you, but also the Church in Germany. The whole Church is in crisis because of the abuse; furthermore, the Church cannot take a step forward now without accepting this crisis. The approach of the ostrich does not help, and the crisis must be accepted from our paschal faith. Sociologisms and psychologisms do not help. Accepting the crisis, as an individual and as a community, that is the only fruitful way; because you only come out of a crisis in community, and furthermore we must realise that you come out of a crisis a better person or a worse person, but never unchanged. [\[1\]](#)

You tell me that you have been reflecting since last year: you have set out to seek the will of God and have decided to accept it, whatever it may be.

I agree with you that we are dealing with a catastrophe: the sad story of sexual abuse and the way the Church has dealt with it until recently. Becoming aware of the hypocrisy in the way of living the faith is a grace and a first step we have to take. We have to take responsibility for history, both as individuals and in community. We cannot remain indifferent in the face of this crime. To accept it presupposes entering into a crisis.

Not everyone wants to accept this fact, but it is the only way. Because making “resolutions” to

change life without “putting the meat on the grill” leads nowhere. Personal, social and historical reality is genuine and it is not enough to accept all this as ideas, since ideas are discussed (rightly so). But reality must always be accepted and needs discernment. It is true that historical events must be evaluated with the hermeneutics of the time in which they happened. But this does not free us from the task of taking responsibility and accepting these events as the history of the “sin that afflicts us”. That is why I believe that every bishop of the Church must accept this and ask himself: What must I do in the face of this catastrophe?

We have already said “mea culpa” more than once in the face of so many mistakes in the past, in many situations, even if we were not personally involved in this historical phase. And it is precisely this approach that is required of us today. We are being asked to reform, which - in this case - does not consist of words, but rather an approach that has the courage to face this crisis, to accept the reality, wherever that will lead. And every reform begins with oneself. Reform in the Church has been brought about by men and women who were not afraid to expose themselves to crisis and let the Lord reform them. That is the only way; otherwise we would only be “ideologues of reform” without putting our own flesh on the line.

The Lord never engaged in “reformation” (if I may permit myself this phrase): neither the project of the Pharisees, nor that of the Sadducees, the Zealots or the Essenes. But He brought it about with His life, with His history, with His flesh, on the cross. And this is the way that you too, dear brother, accept by offering your renunciation of office.

You rightly say in your letter that it does us no good to bury the past. The silence, the omissions, the excessive weight given to the prestige of the institutions - all this only leads to personal and historical failure; it leads us to live with the burden of having - as the saying goes - “skeletons in the closet”.

It is important to throw open to the wind the reality of abuse and the way the Church has dealt with it, and to allow the Spirit to lead us into the wilderness of desolation, to the cross and resurrection. It is the way of the Spirit that we must follow, and the starting point is humble confession: we have made mistakes, we have sinned. It is not the examinations that will save us, nor the power of institutions. We will not be saved by the prestige of our Church, which tends to hide its sins. We will not be saved by the power of money, nor by the opinion of the media (we are often too dependent on these). What will save us is: to open the door to the One who alone can save us, and to confess our nakedness: “I have sinned”, “we have sinned” - and to weep, and stammer as best we can: “Depart from me, for I am a sinner”, a legacy left by the first Pope to the popes and bishops of the Church. Then we will feel that salutary shame which will open the doors to that compassion and tenderness of the Lord which is always close to us. As a Church we need to ask for the grace of shame so that the Lord will keep us from being the shameless harlot of Ezekiel 16.

I like the way you end the letter, “I continue to enjoy being a priest and bishop of this church and

will continue to engage pastorally wherever you see fit and good. I would like to devote the next few years of my ministry more to pastoral care and to work for a spiritual renewal of the Church, as you tirelessly urge”.

And that is exactly my answer, dear brother. Continue as you suggest, but as Archbishop of Munich and Freising. And if you are tempted to think that this Bishop of Rome (your brother who loves you), by confirming your mission and not accepting your resignation, does not understand you, remember what Peter heard in the presence of the Lord when he offered him his renunciation in his own way: “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man” - and heard the answer “Shepherd my sheep”.

With brotherly affection

FRANCISCUS

[1] There is a danger of not accepting the crisis and taking refuge in conflict, a behaviour that ends up suffocating and preventing any possible change. For in crisis there is a seed of hope, whereas in conflict there is a seed of hopelessness. The crisis involves us - the conflict, on the other hand, holds us captive and leads to Pilate's aseptic attitude: “I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves” (*Mt 27: 24*) - an attitude that has already done and continues to do us so much harm.

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