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Letter of the Holy Father Francis to American bishops participating in the Spiritual Exercises in the Mundelein Seminary in Chicago (2 to 8 January 2019)

The following is the letter that the Holy Father sent to the bishops of the Episcopal Conference of the United States of America on the occasion of the Spiritual Exercises, guided by the Preacher of the Papal Household, Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, O.F.M. Cap., on the theme “He appointed twelve that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach” (Mark 3: 14), taking place in the Mundelein Seminary in the archdiocese of Chicago, U.S.A., from 2 to 8 January 2019.

Letter of the Holy Father

To the Bishops of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
Dear Brothers,

During my meeting on 13 September last with the officers of your Conference of Bishops, I suggested that together you make a retreat, a time of seclusion, prayer and discernment, as a necessary step toward responding in the spirit of the Gospel to the crisis of credibility that you are experiencing as a Church. We see this in the Gospel: at critical moments in his mission, the Lord withdrew and spent the whole night in prayer, inviting his disciples to do the same (cf. *Mk* 14:38). We know that, given the seriousness of the situation, no response or approach seems adequate; nonetheless, we as pastors must have the ability, and above all the wisdom, to speak a word born of heartfelt, prayerful and collective listening to the Word of God and to the pain of our people. A word born of the prayer of shepherds who, like Moses, fight and intercede for their people (cf. *Ex* 32:30-32).

In that meeting, I told Cardinal DiNardo and the other bishops present of my desire to accompany you personally for several days on that retreat, and this offer was met with joy and anticipation. As the Successor of Peter, I wanted to join all of you in imploring the Lord to send forth his Spirit who “makes all things new” (cf. *Rev* 21:5) and to point out the paths of life that, as Church, we are called to follow for the good of all those entrusted to our care. Despite my best efforts, I will not be able, for logistical reasons, to be physically present with you. This

letter is meant in some way to make up for that journey which could not take place. I am also pleased that you have accepted my offer to have the Preacher of the Papal Household direct this retreat and to share his deep spiritual wisdom.

With these few lines, I would like to draw near to you as a brother and to reflect with you on some aspects that I consider important, while at the same time encouraging your prayer and the steps you are taking to combat the “culture of abuse” and to deal with the crisis of credibility.

“It cannot be like that with you. Anyone among you who aspires to greatness must serve the rest; whoever wants to rank first among you must serve the needs of all” (*Mk* 10:43-45). With these words, Jesus intervenes and acknowledges the indignation felt by the disciples who heard James and John asking to sit at the right and left of the Master (cf. *Mk* 10:37). His words will help guide us in our shared reflection.

The Gospel is not afraid to mention certain tensions, conflicts and disputes present in the life of the first community of disciples; it would even appear to *want* to do so. It speaks of seeking places of honor, and of jealousy, envy and machinations. To say nothing of the intrigues and the plots that, whether secretly or openly, were hatched around the message and person of Jesus by the political and religious leaders and the merchants of the time (cf. *Mk* 11:15-18). These conflicts increased with the approach of the hour of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, as the prince of this world, and sin and corruption, appeared to have the last word, poisoning everything with bitterness, mistrust and resentment.

As the elderly Simeon had prophesied, difficult and critical moments can bring to light the deepest thoughts, tensions and contradictions present in the disciples individually and as a group (cf. *Lk* 2:35). No one can consider himself exempt from this; we are asked as a community to take care that at those times our decisions, choices, actions and intentions are not tainted by these inner conflicts and tensions, but are instead a response to the Lord who is life for the world. At times of great confusion and uncertainty, we need to be attentive and discerning, to free our hearts of compromises and false certainties, in order to hear what the Lord asks of us in the mission he has given us. Many actions can be helpful, good and necessary, and may even seem correct, but not all of them have the “flavour” of the Gospel. To put it colloquially, we have to be careful that “the cure does not become worse than the disease”. And this requires of us wisdom, prayer, much listening and fraternal communion.

1. *“It cannot be like that with you”*

In recent years, the Church in the United States has been shaken by various scandals that have gravely affected its credibility. These have been times of turbulence in the lives of all those victims who suffered in their flesh the abuse of power and conscience and sexual abuse on the part of ordained ministers, male and female religious and lay faithful. But times of turbulence and suffering also for their families and for the entire People of God.

The Church’s credibility has been seriously undercut and diminished by these sins and crimes, but even more by the efforts made to deny or conceal them. This has led to a growing sense of uncertainty, distrust and vulnerability among the faithful. As we know, the mentality that would cover things up, far from helping to resolve conflicts, enabled them to fester and cause even greater harm to the network of relationships that today we are called to heal and restore.

We know that the sins and crimes that were committed, and their repercussions on the ecclesial, social and cultural levels, have deeply affected the faithful. They have caused great perplexity, upset and confusion; and this can often serve as an excuse for some to discredit and call into question the selfless lives of all those many Christians who show “an immense love for humanity inspired by the God who became man”.^[1] Whenever the Gospel message proves inconvenient or disturbing, many voices are raised in an attempt to silence that message by pointing to the sins and inconsistencies of the members of the Church and, even more, of her pastors.

The hurt caused by these sins and crimes has also deeply affected the communion of bishops, and generated

not the sort of healthy and necessary disagreements and tensions found in any living body, but rather division and dispersion (cf. *Mt 26:31*). The latter are certainly not fruits and promptings of the Holy Spirit, but rather of “the enemy of human nature”,^[2] who takes greater advantage of division and dispersion than of the tensions and disagreements reasonably to be expected in the lives of Christ’s disciples.

Combatting the culture of abuse, the loss of credibility, the resulting bewilderment and confusion, and the discrediting of our mission urgently demands of us a renewed and decisive approach to resolving conflicts. Jesus would tell us: “You know how among the Gentiles those who seem to exercise authority lord it over them; their great ones make their importance felt. It cannot be like that with you” (*Mk 10:42-43*). Loss of credibility calls for a specific approach, since it cannot be regained by issuing stern decrees or by simply creating new committees or improving flow charts, as if we were in charge of a department of human resources. That kind of vision ends up reducing the mission of the bishop and that of the Church to a mere administrative or organizational function in the “evangelization business”. Let us be clear: many of those things are necessary yet insufficient, since they cannot grasp and deal with reality in its complexity; ultimately, they risk reducing everything to an organizational problem.

The loss of credibility also raises painful questions about the way we relate to one another. Clearly, a living fabric has come undone, and we, like weavers, are called to repair it. This involves our ability, or inability, as a community to forge bonds and create spaces that are healthy, mature and respectful of the integrity and privacy of each person. It involves our ability to bring people together and to get them enthused and confident about a broad, shared project that is at once unassuming, solid, sober and transparent. This requires not only a new approach to management, but also a change in our mind-set (*metanoia*), our way of praying, our handling of power and money, our exercise of authority and our way of relating to one another and to the world around us. Changes in the Church are always aimed at encouraging a constant state of missionary and pastoral conversion capable of opening up new ecclesial paths ever more in keeping with the Gospel and, as such, respectful of human dignity. The programmatic aspect of our activity should be joined to a paradigmatic aspect that brings out its underlying spirit and meaning. The two are necessarily linked. Without this clear and decisive focus, everything we do risks being tainted by self-referentiality, self-preservation and defensiveness, and thus doomed from the start. Our efforts may be well-structured and organized, but will lack evangelical power, for they will not help us to be a Church that bears credible witness, but instead “a noisy gong, a clanging cymbal” (*1 Cor 13:1*).

In a word, a new ecclesial season needs bishops who can teach others how to discern God’s presence in the history of his people, and not mere administrators. Ideas can be discussed but vital situations have to be discerned. Consequently, amid the upset and confusion experienced by our communities, our primary duty is to foster a shared spirit of discernment, rather than to seek the relative calm resulting from compromise or from a democratic vote where some emerge as “winners” and others not. No! It is about finding a collegial and paternal way of embracing the present situation, one that, most importantly, can protect those in our care from losing hope and feeling spiritually abandoned.^[3] This will enable us to be fully immersed in reality, seeking to appreciate and hear it from within, without being held hostage to it.

We know that times of trial and tribulation can threaten our fraternal communion. Yet we also know that they can become times of grace sustaining our commitment to Christ and making it credible. This credibility will not be grounded in ourselves, our statements, our merits or our personal or collective good name. All these are signs of our attempt – nearly always subconscious – to justify ourselves on the basis of our own strengths and abilities (or of someone else’s misfortune). Credibility will be the fruit of a united body that, while acknowledging its sinfulness and limitations, is at the same time capable of preaching the need for conversion. For we do not want to preach ourselves but rather Christ who died for us (cf. *2 Cor 4:5*). We want to testify that at the darkest moments of our history the Lord makes himself present, opens new paths and anoints our faltering faith, our wavering hope and our tepid charity.

A personal and collective awareness of our limitations reminds us, as Saint John XXIII said, that “it must not be imagined that authority knows no bounds”.^[4] It cannot be aloof in its discernment and in its efforts to pursue the common good. A faith and consciousness lacking reference to the community would be like a “Kantian transcendental”: it will end up proclaiming “a God without Christ, a Christ without the Church, a Church without its people”. It will set up a false and dangerous opposition between personal and ecclesial life, between a God of

pure love and the suffering flesh of Christ. Worse, it could risk turning God into an “idol” for one particular group. Constant reference to universal communion, as also to the magisterium and age-old tradition of the Church, saves believers from absolutizing any one group, historical period or culture within the Church. Our catholicity is at stake also in our ability as pastors to learn how to listen to one another, to give and receive help from one another, to work together and to receive the enrichment that other churches can contribute to our following of Christ. The catholicity of the Church cannot be reduced merely to a question of doctrine or law; rather, it reminds us that we are not solitary pilgrims: “If one member suffers, all suffer together” (1 Cor 12:26).

This collegial awareness of our being sinners in need of constant conversion, albeit deeply distressed and pained by all that that has happened, allows us to enter into affective communion with our people. It will liberate us from the quest of false, facile and futile forms of triumphalism that would defend spaces rather than initiate processes. It will keep us from turning to reassuring certainties that keep us from approaching and appreciating the extent and implications of what has happened. It will also aid in the search for suitable measures free of false premises or rigid formulations no longer capable of speaking to or stirring the hearts of men and women in our time.[5]

Affective communion with the feelings of our people, with their disheartenment, urges us to exercise a collegial spiritual fatherhood that does not offer banal responses or act defensively, but instead seeks to learn – like the prophet Elijah amid his own troubles – to listen to the voice of the Lord. That voice is not to be found in the tempest or the earthquake, but in the calm born of acknowledging our hurt before the present situation and letting ourselves together be summoned anew by God’s word (cf. 1 Kg 19:9-18).

This approach demands of us the decision to abandon a *modus operandi* of disparaging, discrediting, playing the victim or the scold in our relationships, and instead to make room for the gentle breeze that the Gospel alone can offer. Let us not forget that “the *collegial* lack of a heartfelt and prayerful acknowledgment of our limitations prevents grace from working more effectively within us, for no room is left for bringing about the potential good that is part of a sincere and genuine journey of growth”.[6] Let us try to break the vicious circle of recrimination, undercutting and discrediting, by avoiding gossip and slander in the pursuit of a path of prayerful and contrite acceptance of our limitations and sins, and the promotion of dialogue, discussion and discernment. This will dispose us to finding evangelical paths that can awaken and encourage the reconciliation and credibility that our people and our mission require of us. We will do this if we can stop projecting onto others our own confusion and discontent, which are obstacles to unity,[7] and dare to come together, on our knees, before the Lord and let ourselves be challenged by his wounds, in which we will be able to see the wounds of the world. Jesus tells us: “You know how among the Gentiles those who seem to exercise authority lord it over them; their great ones make their importance felt. It cannot be like that with you”.

2. *“Anyone among you who aspires to greatness must serve the rest; whoever wants to rank first among you must serve the needs of all”*

God’s faithful people and the Church’s mission continue to suffer greatly as a result of abuses of power and conscience and sexual abuse, and the poor way that they were handled, as well as the pain of seeing an episcopate lacking in unity and concentrated more on pointing fingers than on seeking paths of reconciliation. This situation forces us to look to what is essential and to rid ourselves of all that stands in the way of a clear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

What is being asked of us today is a new presence in the world, conformed to the cross of Christ, one that takes concrete shape in service to the men and women of our time. I think of the words of Saint Paul VI at the beginning of his pontificate: “If we want to be pastors, fathers and teachers, we must also act as brothers. Dialogue thrives on friendship, and most especially on service. All this we must remember and strive to put into practice on the example and precept of Christ (Jn 13:14-17)”.[8]

This attitude is not concerned with respect or success and garnering applause for our actions; instead, it requires that we as pastors really decide to be a seed that will grow whenever and however the Lord best determines. That decision will save us from falling into the trap of measuring the value of our efforts by the

standards of functionalism and efficiency that govern the business world. The path to be taken is rather one of openness to the efficacy and transformative power of God's Kingdom, which, like a mustard seed, the smallest and most insignificant of seeds, becomes a tree in which the birds of the air make their nests (cf. *Mt* 13:32-33). Amid the tempest, we must never lose faith in the quiet, daily and effective power of the Holy Spirit at work in human hearts and in all of history.

Credibility is born of trust, and trust is born of sincere, daily, humble and generous service to all, but especially to those dearest to the Lord's heart (cf. *Mt* 25:31-46). It will be a service offered not out of concern with marketing or strategizing to reclaim lost prestige or to seek accolades, but rather – as I insisted in the recent Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* – because it belongs to “the beating heart of the Gospel”.^[9]

The call to holiness keeps us from falling into false dichotomies and reductive ways of thinking, and from remaining silent in the face of a climate prone to hatred and rejection, disunity and violence between brothers and sisters. The Church, as the “sign and instrument of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race” (*Lumen Gentium*, 1), bears in her heart and soul the sacred mission of being a place of encounter and welcome not only for her members but for all humanity. It is part of her identity and mission to work tirelessly for all that can contribute to unity between individuals and peoples as a symbol and sacrament of Christ's sacrifice on the cross for all men and women, without distinction. For “there does not exist among you Jew or Greek, slave or freeman, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus” (*Gal* 3:28). This is the greatest service she offers, all the more so today, when we are witnessing a resurgence of inflammatory rhetoric and prejudices old and new. Our communities today must testify in a concrete and creative way that God is the Father of all, and that in his eyes we are all his sons and daughters. Our credibility also depends on the extent to which, side by side with others, we help to strengthen a social and cultural fabric that is not only in danger of unravelling, but also of harboring and facilitating new forms of hatred. As a Church, we cannot be held hostage by this side or that, but must be attentive always to start from those who are most vulnerable. With the words of the Eucharistic Prayer, let us ask the Lord that, “in a world torn by strife, your people may shine forth as a prophetic sign of unity and concord” (*Masses for Various Needs*, I)

How sublime is the task at hand, brothers; we cannot keep silent about it or downplay it because of our own limitations and faults! I recall the wise words of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, that we can repeat, both as individuals and together: “Yes, I have many human faults and failures... But God bends down and uses us, you and me, to be his love and his compassion in the world; he bears our sins, our troubles and our faults. He depends on us to love the world and to show how much he loves it. If we are too concerned with ourselves, we will have no time left for others”.^[10]

Dear brothers, the Lord was well aware that, at the hour of the cross, lack of unity, division and dispersion, as well as attempts to flee from that hour, would be the greatest temptations faced by his disciples – attitudes that would distort and hinder their mission. That is why he asked the Father to watch over them, so that at those times they would be one, even as he and the Father are one, and that none of them would be lost (cf. *Jn* 17:11-12). Entering with trust into Jesus' prayer to the Father, we want to learn from him and, with *firm resolve*, to begin this time of prayer, silence and reflection, of dialogue and communion, of listening and discernment. In this way, we will allow him to conform our hearts to his image and help us discover his will.

On this path we are not alone. From the beginning, Mary accompanied and sustained the community of the disciples. By her maternal presence she helped the community not to lose its bearings by breaking up into closed groups or by thinking that it could save itself. She protected the community of the disciples from the spiritual isolation that leads to self-centeredness. By her faith, she helped them to persevere amid perplexity, trusting that God's light would come. We ask her to keep us united and persevering as on the day of Pentecost, so that the Spirit will be poured forth into our hearts and help us in every time and place to bear witness to the resurrection.

Dear brothers, with these thoughts I am one with you during these days of spiritual retreat. I am praying for you; please do the same for me. May the Lord bless you and Our Lady watch over you.

Faternally,

FRANCIS

Vatican City, 1 January 2019
