

An Open Letter to Pope Benedict XVI from a Gay Catholic

By Robert Calderisi

This is a draft, to which the author would welcome reactions and comments. It is intended not just for Roman Catholics but also for Christians and, more generally, people of good will who believe that the Church may be a force for good in the world. (The text is 72 pages long.)

Foreword

There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are born to manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us. It's in everybody, and as we let our light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.

-- Nelson Mandela, Inaugural Address as President of South Africa, 1994

In the weeks before his sudden death in Northern Ontario on July 29, 2005, my identical twin brother Ronald gave me a great deal of advice about this Open Letter. Essentially it was: "Don't do it!" More specifically: "Do you really expect the Pope to read it?" "What can you bring to the subject that others haven't done already?" "Don't you know that experts have written *whole books* about each of the matters you'll be covering?"

All the same, he couldn't put his finger on what discomfited him the most. He doubted it was my openness about my sexuality -- although, as a fervent Baptist, he had fervent misgivings about that. Perhaps it was my presumptuousness, even insolence, in addressing the Holy Father. He was not quite sure. Now, I will never know.

A few months later, I had a note from a 23 year old seminarian friend in France: "What's this about your writing to the Pope? I hope it's not an attack on him, or the decisions he's taking. The Pope is the Vicar of Christ. He is Christ living and present in the Church. One must love and venerate him, as is his due." I felt a little bushwhacked. Why would my young friend presume that writing to the head of the Roman Catholic Church would be disrespectful, any more than sending a letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury or the Dalai Lama? In response, I referred him to the First Letter

of Timothy (5:1): “Never be harsh with an elder; appeal to him as if he were your father.” This was not to remind him that I was older than he was, but rather to explain the approach I would be taking in this Letter.

Another friend -- formerly a Catholic, now an agnostic -- asked: “How can you continue to be part of an organization when you respect only *some* of its rules? Even country clubs expect all their members to meet the same standards.” I replied that, for me, the most important rules were the ones that Christ set, and He said absolutely nothing about the major social issues of our time, except divorce. Skeptics might argue that this is a light standard to live by; if so, they have not read the Gospels carefully enough. As G.K. Chesterton wrote in 1908: “Christianity even when watered down is hot enough to boil all modern society to rags.”¹

Despite the provocative title of this book, I am little more than an overgrown altar boy, torn between a deep attachment to the traditions and values of the Roman Catholic Church and the dream that one day it can become truly universal. As you will see, I do not regard homosexuality as an appropriate subject for Church teaching, let alone approval or disapproval, any more than I would expect the Vatican to comment on the rising and falling of the tides. I am not going to plead for greater openness towards gay and lesbian Catholics, although obviously I believe in that. Nor will I argue that homosexual Christians should be more tolerant towards the Church in its current limitations, although here, too, my sympathies will be clear. Instead, my focus will be on four topics that seem to me crucial for the whole Church: promoting Christian unity, admitting married men to the priesthood, removing all remaining discrimination against women (including admitting them to holy orders), and abolishing the stigma which currently hangs over divorced men and women.

This essay is intended for the general reader, and draws on existing theological and historical knowledge. It does not score points, engage in ridicule, or assume the worst about the current papacy. It is just one Christian’s view of four issues that hobble the Church and cause great hurt to many of its sons and daughters. One does not need to be an expert to do that. Indeed, who else can explain what is in your own mind and heart? This Letter is a contribution to the debate that has been raging within the Roman Catholic Church for a long time -- much of it underground. It is written from a particular point of view, but also with deep loyalty and love.

As an evangelical Christian, my brother Ronald was attracted to Benedict XVI. That interest seemed ironic to me in the light of Ronald's own spiritual history (after all, how many people of Italian descent have migrated to the Baptist confession?); but his openness to the new Pope encouraged me in my own inclinations. My brother didn't just talk about his faith. He *lived* it as a surgeon in Vancouver, the Canadian Arctic, Africa, and the Persian Gulf. So, in writing what follows, I have tried to heed his concerns, hoping the result will do honor to our common faith and make sense to a large number of Christians, not just Catholics. If this small book also comforts a few readers, and triggers the odd smile, it will prove worthwhile.

Open Letter to Pope Benedict XVI from a Gay Catholic

Your Holiness,

It is not in my upbringing to write to Popes. In fact, as you will see below, I owe my very existence to the unbending nature of the Roman Catholic Church.

I once wrote to my parish priest to suggest he be kinder to our choir director, but felt guilty as soon as I mailed the letter, knowing that I should have been courteous and courageous enough to complain in person. I have also written to newspaper editors over the years, usually to reinforce points in an article or editorial rather than to challenge them. But your election on April 19th, 2005 as the 265th successor of St. Peter, and my twenty years of frustration with unnecessary obstacles to a more vital, caring and representative Church have pushed me to it. Even then, I am writing this out of love and loyalty to the Church rather than just impatience.

Like many Catholics, I was disappointed by your election, as it seemed to herald a further tightening of the screws in some areas -- such as the dialogue with other faiths. Your reported discomfort with John Paul II's meeting at Assisi in 1982 "on an equal footing" with the leaders of other world religions was a striking sign of your values. An event that had inspired millions of people around the world had actually *worried* you. I don't remember anyone commenting on the status of the various religious leaders present, although few Christians I know would challenge the Dalai Lama's right to be on the same platform as the Holy Father. These were wise and

holy men opening up to each other in the interests of greater harmony and peace. Where was the danger in your mind?

But, like Americans rallying around a president they have doubts about at a time of war, and being very much a Catholic, I quickly accepted the Cardinals' decision. I had hoped that a Latin American would be elected, but I suddenly saw your elevation to the papacy as inevitable -- if only because you were the Dean of the College of Cardinals, one of only three who had been in office when John Paul II took over, and -- many assumed -- the one who had been running the Church during the previous few years when the pope's disabilities had become more pronounced. In the run-up to the conclave, I was impatient with the adjectives "conservative" and "progressive" used to describe various candidates, as if the Church lent itself to political stereotyping. Instead, I prayed that your "conservatism" would be as rich and varied and caring as that of John Paul II. I refused to accept the throwaway phrases of clever journalists: that you would be a "Panzer Pope" or a "German Shepherd." Like others, I tried to believe that your change of role from head of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith to Supreme Pontiff of 1.2 billion believers would transform you, and that, despite your age (78), you would move from being the Defender, to an inspirer, of the Faith.

I was heartened by the comments of the Archbishop of Chicago on CNN, describing you as a "humble genius" and quoting a cleaning lady who had seen you almost every day for twenty years who said that you were a "true Christian." I also was pleased to read in The Economist that you had spent most of your life in Rome quietly in a simple apartment, remote from the social life of most Cardinals. Months later, I was impressed to hear the Vatican reporter for the *National Catholic Reporter* say that he had interviewed 500 visiting bishops in Rome over six years, all of whom had said that their best meetings were with you. They thought you were attentive, wise, and eager to consult.² And I was delighted by your choice of name. With so many eminent namesakes to choose from, I was certain the next pope would take the respectful -- and lazy -- route of being John Paul III. "Benedict" is a beautiful and inspiring name, and it suggested a fresh start.

I did my homework. I had missed your homily at the funeral of your predecessor, John Paul II, as the electricity was cut off at my hotel in Marrakech where I was on holiday. So I printed your sermon from the

Vatican website when I got home and found it lucid and moving, like everyone else. And I fought my doubts. On TV, the day of your inauguration, I was crestfallen to see the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, rush into a small room to greet you, a large fraternal smile on his face, plainly intending to give you a warm hug. You held him off at a safe distance with your two stiff arms in front of the cameras, and there was a flicker of disappointment on his face. What a missed opportunity for Christian fellowship, I thought. And then more humorously: How often does an Englishman -- or, more precisely in this case, a Welshman -- try to embrace someone?

Then, I was happy that there was very little news about you after weeks of intense publicity around the suffering and death of John Paul and the outpouring of public grief for him. It was time for the world -- and the Church -- to settle down, to move from deep sorrow (and also some rock star adulation for a major media figure) to a more mature assessment of his long papacy, to replace superlatives ("one of the greatest popes in history") with genuine appreciation of John Paul's transformative role in Eastern Europe, his social teaching, his opposition to war (including the March 2003 invasion of Iraq), his rekindling of faith among many young people in the teachings of Jesus Christ, and his commitment to human life (opposition to capital punishment as well as abortion). On the other half of the scales were his stubbornness, his unyielding positions on matters of deep personal concern to many Christians, and his public lecturing -- most famously of the miserable minister of culture in the Sandinista government of Nicaragua (also a priest) whom he reprimanded on the airport tarmac in front of the world's cameras, as he knelt before the pope in humble homage.

In the months that followed, there were hints, and only hints, of where you intended to take the Church in the next few years. There seemed reasons for concern but also signs of your humanity and your tenderness as a pastor. I loved your answer to a young child in October 2005 when she asked why she had to keep going to confession if her sins were always the same. "It is true that our sins are always the same," you said. "Yet do we not clean our house, our room, at least once a week, though the dirt is always the same? If we do not, we run the risk of dirt accumulating, though we do not see it."³ I was impressed by the theme you chose for your first Encyclical Letter, *Deus Caritas Est [God Is Love]*, issued on Christmas Day 2005 and I was interested to learn that you were the first pope in memory to circulate the text widely for comment. I smiled when the Canadian Governor-General

visited you in February 2006 and asked if it was true that you spoke ten languages. You replied rather sheepishly: “Perhaps three.”⁴

As your first anniversary dawned in April 2006, most commentators pointed to how much more complex and interesting a man you were than the cardboard character many of them had portrayed at first. Even your old friend, Hans Küng, the pioneering liberal theologian who had been punished in 1979 for posing challenging questions about papal infallibility and other doctrines, was sounding hopeful. A year before, he had greeted your election by telling reporters that you would be very comfortable in the new role as you were “right out of the Middle Ages.” You reached out to him and spent time together, trying to find common ground. By the time of your first anniversary, Professor Küng was being quoted quite differently, saying that you might prove better for the Church than a radical pope might have done.⁵ These more sober, informed, and considered assessments were of great solace to many Catholics, who want to believe in the wisdom and sensitivity, not just the authority, of the Bishop of Rome.

In May 2006 came the front-page news that you had commissioned a study into the possibility of allowing the use of condoms by married couples where one of them is HIV-positive.⁶ While an apparently minor exception to the general rule against contraception, and far from being decided, it represented a major concession to the argument that the Church’s teachings were complicating efforts, particularly in poor countries, to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. It was also the top of a potentially slippery slope towards more general exceptions to Church rules on sexual relations and perhaps even the precedent for an entire revamping of past positions. You were aware of that risk and the expectations your action would raise, but apparently you were prepared to consider such change in the interests of humanity and what one influential cardinal called the “lesser evil” -- inhibiting the conception of new life instead of causing unnecessary human suffering.

In September 2006, I felt deeply sorry for you when the Islamic world erupted with anger at your talk at the University of Regensburg in Germany. Like many observers, I thought that perhaps you apologized too much for the misunderstanding. After all, why can non-Catholics complain about the Crusades, the repression of Jews and Protestants, and the Spanish Inquisition, while Catholics are not allowed to refer to the historic brutality of other faiths? But, more importantly, I was relieved by the main theme of

your talk that day: the relationship between reason and faith. To those who believe in God but also in the magnificence and providence of human reason, your words carried considerable comfort. This was all the more true, as some seasoned commentators had suggested that the ambition of your papacy was no less than to reverse 500 years of human progress and return the Christian church to the primacy -- or, to put it kindly, the simplicity -- it enjoyed in the human mind before the Enlightenment and even the Renaissance.

The newspapers and cable networks picked up only some of the words you quoted from the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologus (1391). More important were the ones you cited about violence being incompatible with the nature of God and the nature of the soul. "God," the Emperor said, "is not pleased by blood -- and not acting reasonably is contrary to God's nature. Faith is born of the soul, not the body. Whoever would lead someone to faith needs the ability to speak well and to reason properly, without violence and threats... To convince a reasonable soul, one does not need a strong arm, or weapons of any kind, or any other means of threatening a person with death."⁷

How refreshing to hear these words in an age when we are accustomed to appeals to blind faith and *fatwas* issued from religious extremists in the American Midwest as well as the Middle East! In a gentle and rational voice, you seemed to address some of your critics -- and undoubtedly some of your admirers, too: "A critique of modern reason from within has nothing to do with putting the clock back to the time before the Enlightenment and rejecting the insights of the modern age. The positive aspects of modernity are to be acknowledged unreservedly: we are all grateful for the marvelous possibilities that it has opened up for mankind and for the progress of humanity... We also see the dangers arising from these possibilities and we must ask ourselves how we can overcome them. We will succeed in doing so only if reason and faith come together in a new way, if we overcome the self-imposed limitation of reason to the empirically falsifiable, and if we once more disclose its vast horizons."⁸

Equally reassuring was your introduction to a book about Jesus, which you described as a work of "personal research" rather than Catholic doctrine. "Consequently, everyone is free to contradict me. I only ask the readers that they read with sympathy, without which there will be no comprehension."⁹ Many people were surprised that you would invite debate at all, rather than

take advantage of papal infallibility. But I saw it as a sign of your openness and humility and an encouragement to all Christians who feel it important to raise difficult subjects constructively and fraternally.

During this time, I have tried to imagine what I would tell you if we bumped into each other on a walk across St. Peter's Square or at a nearby café as you spent an evening incognito away from your marble walls. Instead, I have decided to write this letter.

Who Am I?

I should, of course, introduce myself. You are my sixth pope -- which is one of the reasons I am trying to put things into perspective. I have faint memories of Pius XII and was always sorry that he should have been the target of criticism for not taking a stronger position against Hitler -- when Western powers had let the dictator develop his military strength and ignored what might happen to the Jews. My image was of a frail, gentle, probably holy man weighed down by his responsibilities and -- who knows? -- perhaps some guilt. He seemed rigid and austere, but he was also trying in his own way to nudge the Church into the modern era. The institution, he said, is "a living organism," and its life would be poorer without the "expression of public opinion."¹⁰ Like most Catholics, I fell in love with John XXIII, the "caretaker" pope who shook up the institution in just five years by calling the Second Vatican Council. This led to priests saying Mass facing the congregation rather than the altar, and in the local language rather than Latin, as well as to passionate calls for greater Christian unity and an almost Protestant definition of the Church as "the people of God" rather than a set of structures and hierarchies. I had great respect for Paul VI -- an intellectual caught in a turbulent period (1963-1978) when moral values and Catholic patience in Western countries were wearing thin. His compromises were of the mild, loving kind rather than those of shirking responsibility -- although he disappointed me deeply in 1968 with his reassertion of the ban on artificial birth control in his encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae* ["Of Human Life"]. I was living in Africa when the first John Paul became -- very briefly -- pope in August 1978. The only image I have of him is the childlike smile which endeared him to everyone during his 33 days in office.

John Paul II was a revelation, but I always compared him with Paul VI rather than see him as a pontiff without precedent or as a unique leader of the Church. I worried for him during his first visit to Poland as he began

confronting the Communist state in speeches which could have led to his being permanently barred from the country, if he went too far. His choice of words and challenges was remarkable. I cheered his warm embrace of Lech Walesa's Solidarity Union -- a plain political challenge to the Polish state -- even if I later found it contradictory to his stern position on "liberation theology" in Latin America. In extreme cases, I felt, the Church did need to stand up to dictatorship and the abuse of human rights, and Communism in Europe was not much worse than the regimes Catholic priests were fighting in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Central America. Some zealots certainly exaggerated what Christianity and Marxism had in common; others slid into violent rather than peaceful resistance. But their purpose -- applying the Gospel to the here-and-now rather than to some imaginary set of rights and wrongs -- seemed admirable to me.

I followed John Paul's travels with pride and fascination, relishing his determination to preach hope and community to local churches -- even as I was aware that these trips were expensive and left the hosts more than morally indebted. I was amused by the efforts of national leaders to recognize and even share in the Pope's moral authority, including Fidel Castro, who seemed uncomfortable in a business suit rather than military uniform and wary about every sentence his visitor uttered, wondering whether he would have to ignore or parry it in his own (longwinded) response. I agreed with John Paul's social teaching -- the importance of freedom and the evils of totalitarianism, but also the dangers of capitalism and its tendency to turn people into objects as workers and consumers. And, like many Europeans and North Americans, I was disappointed by his strong views -- often expressed in documents you wrote -- on contraception, divorce, priestly celibacy, the role of women in the church, and homosexuality. But I never stopped loving him deeply as my spiritual leader and Holy Father.

I revered each of these men because I had had a classical Catholic education. I grew up in the Italian community of Montreal -- at the time, the fourth largest "Italian" city in the world after Milan, New York and Toronto. I went to a series of Roman Catholic schools -- Immaculata, St. Monica's, Mount Holy Names, St. Lawrence College, Marymount, Loyola College. Even when I attended a non-Catholic institution -- Oxford University -- I ended up in St. Peter's College, founded in 1929 by Nonconformist Anglicans. The college emblem -- two crossed keys -- was the same as that of the Holy See and in the winter boat races on the Thames our rowing

scarves consisted of two broad bands of white and yellow, the Vatican colors.

My Catholic education was more than classical: It was intense. I went to Catholic boarding school for five years, first, with French Canadian nuns and then with Irish Canadian priests. This meant going to Mass and Communion every morning, usually serving as altar boy, and learning the Latin hymns by heart at an early age. (I still sing them accurately fifty years later.) At the tender age of nine, I committed myself into “slavery” to the Blessed Virgin under the guidance of my elementary school teacher who was attracted to the wacky 19th century French sect of St. Louis de Montfort. I remember, quite vividly, trembling in the school chapel on the Feast of the Annunciation (March 25, 1959) as I made my “vows” to Mary. Like many young Catholic boys of the time, I flirted with entering seminary and becoming a priest. I visited a Dominican monastery in Montreal with my parents and was photographed in the friars’ white and black habit, looking angelic but goofy with my hands held together and my gaze lifted reverently towards heaven. (Later, I realized I was more attracted to their robes than their way of life.) My religious education was so complete, and the guilt it fostered so varied, that I used to be self-conscious undressing in front of a crucifix.

When I finished high school, my parents hoped I would choose to go to McGill -- the prestigious English-speaking university in the city -- but my twin brother and I preferred to go to a smaller Jesuit college at the other end of town. We were only fifteen years old, but my parents deferred to our view. There, I studied history and my brother took pre-medical sciences, but both of us were obliged to take philosophy and theology courses each year. Over four years, only two of my twenty-two teachers were members of religious communities; yet, it was they who rattled my beliefs. In my first week at college, as she tried to explain the use of literary devices in the Book of Genesis, a nun asked our theology class: “How many of you still believe in Noah’s Ark?” I put up my hand immediately, but I was all alone, and everyone else -- including the teacher -- broke out into laughter. In my last year, a Hungarian priest led us through the documents of the Second Vatican Council and told us that if we felt our religious aspirations could not be met within the Catholic Church, we would be *sinning* if we did not experiment with Buddhism, Judaism or Islam. It was 1968, and he was a Jesuit, but even in a year of international ferment, it seemed an extreme expression of what you have called, more recently, “moral relativism.” I

appreciated his challenge and openness, and his emphasis on the importance of personal rather than imposed beliefs, but I recognized, too, that this professor was going much further than even the Vatican Council had imagined.

My parents were not churchgoers -- at least by the time I reached adolescence. My mother had gone to Mass every Sunday with my older brothers and sisters, while my Dad made pancakes at home. (My eldest brother once explained our father's absence from church, to a teacher, as solemnly as if our Dad were administering to the sick.) By the time I was in high school, my mother was running a nursing home for elderly women -- to put us all through college -- and she no longer had time to go to church. But she was a devout believer to the end of her life at the age of 91. She encouraged my faith and was reassured by it. Like many other Italian -- and Jewish and African and Chinese -- mothers, she was a minor saint in her devotion to her family. No one had to teach her the notion of service. As someone else has said about his own mother, "She was then, and always will be, the source of my strength, my will, my ability to love."¹¹

My father believed in a Creator, but not a personal one -- until two months before he died. At 92, he had a stroke and, at the same time, a mystical experience, which led him to talk about his "Savior" during the final weeks of his life. But both my parents had reasons to be impatient with the Catholic Church. When they had already had four children and were thinking that that was enough, my mother attended a parish retreat run by the Paulist Fathers who castigated anyone who was considering birth control. During confession, my mother made a fateful decision. She went home a little glumly that evening and told my father that "we're going to have to try a little harder still." Undoubtedly, she had been thinking of her own mother who had been pregnant nineteen times and lost half of her children to miscarriages, stillbirths, and infant diseases. Obviously, our maternal grandfather was a bit of a brute, and our grandmother was patient and long-suffering, but she died exhausted at the age of 59. My parents had a fifth child, a son, and then twins -- two boys. Then and there, they decided that seven children were as many as they would have, no matter what the next life brought. I was one of those twins, and hence quite literally owe my life to the Catholic Church, but I am grateful that my mother did not end up like my grandmother, driven to death by a reproductive life over which she had no control.

Interestingly, my grandmother was horrified that her daughter had discussed the matter with anyone. Usually close-mouthed about personal subjects, she told my mother: "It's a sin to give ideas to priests. It's hard enough for them to be celibate without us coming along and discussing our sex life with them. Don't talk anymore about these matters when you go to confession and you'll be a lot happier in the end, too." So, perhaps I also owe my existence to my grandmother's advice on rationing the truth.

Another reason my parents became more distant from the Church was a knock on the door in the mid-1950s. Quebec -- like Ireland -- was near the high-water mark of Catholic domination. Priests told parishioners how to vote. The province's reactionary government did the Church's bidding -- including persecuting Jehovah's Witnesses. And French Canadian Catholic households were required to pay "tithes" (or church taxes) to the diocese in a tradition which had been killed off in France by the Revolution of 1789. The person at my parents' door wanted to know why they had not been paying theirs. They explained that they were attached to an English-, not French-speaking, parish, but the Archdiocese of Montreal would not accept an English "no" for an answer. They sent my parents a letter threatening to sue them if they did not begin making their dutiful contributions. My mother -- who protected her children and husband as fiercely as a tiger looks after her cubs -- swung into action and obtained a letter of exemption from the Archbishop, recognizing that the family had always been part of an English parish.

Leaving the Church

By the time I finished college in 1968, Quebec was turning against the Church -- and so was I. That summer, Paul VI issued the encyclical Humanae Vitae ["On Human Life"], which reiterated the Church's policy on birth control. The Church's teaching on the matter was already irrelevant to educated Catholics in Europe and North America, who knew better than to trust the Church's wisdom on a matter far removed from the daily life of most priests and theologians. But I worried about the millions of credulous women in Latin America and Africa who would be forced to lead wretched lives -- like my grandmother -- because the Church could not relax its belief in the importance of "potential" life. I could not understand how the Church -- and a pope sophisticated enough to know how this rigidity would affect poor people -- could be so heartless.

That summer, too, I attended two mixed marriages which put the Catholic Church in a very bad light. A girl friend in Montreal decided to marry someone from the United Church and asked her parish priest whether he would be willing to bless their marriage. He asked to see her fiancé and called him a “pagan” because his denomination did not believe in the Trinity. Both were obviously put out by this and chose to marry in the United Church instead. I attended the ceremony and was touched by the warmth and simplicity of the service. It was all the more moving because of the cold shoulder the Catholic priest had given them.

A month later, the scene was repeated in Philadelphia where a cousin was denied marriage in her parish because she was engaged to a Methodist. Again, the Protestant service spoke more about love and commitment and Christian fellowship than the Catholic priest who had turned the couple away. I remember asking myself: What is the use of the Church -- meaning the *institution* -- if it cannot be of comfort to its members at such important moments of their lives?

For the next ten years, I rarely went to church and lived the life of an agnostic. I was cheerful, despite my doubts, and still interested in Christianity. I relished the sound of the Psalms being sung in chapel at Oxford but recognized that this was now an aesthetic rather than religious experience. I tried to do good works -- ministering to alcoholics at a shelter by the Thames, and tolerating their strong and sometimes abusive language in the name of human brotherhood rather than Christ. I visited medieval cathedrals across France and Spain, sensing a special connection with them. When I first set foot in St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome in the summer of 1974, I felt I was coming home. In Africa, where I lived for part of that time, I went to Catholic services on important feasts like Christmas and Easter. Wherever I was in the world, I would go into a church at three o’clock on Good Friday. But, throughout those years, I maintained a stubborn *intellectual* opposition to established churches of all kinds. I knew for certain that, if I had been alive during the 16th century Reformation, I would have followed Martin Luther into a new, more simple form of Christianity. But, four centuries later, I preferred the open vistas and fresh air of personal belief and values.

Deep down, I may have been going through the same process described by Jean Vanier, the Canadian founder of a world-wide network of homes for people with intellectual disabilities, called *L’Arche* [The Ark]: “It

took time for me to see and accept the brokenness in the history and life of my own church, and to discover the beauty, truth, and good in other churches and religions. Just as it took time for me to discover all that was broken in myself: my prejudices, my fears, my mixed motivations, my weaknesses, my need to succeed, and my fear of failure.”¹²

Coming Home

My sense of alienation evaporated when I moved to Paris in late 1978 and discovered a monastic community, founded just three years before, at the church of St. Gervais just behind the Hôtel de Ville. Their services had a light touch of Eastern Orthodox tradition, including the use of icons and musical rhythms and chants which were both unfamiliar and magnetic. And the preaching was superb -- drawing out the meaning of the Scriptures we had heard earlier in the Mass (rather than simply repeating or paraphrasing them) and applying it to everyday life. This was a simpler, more compelling theology than the one I had learned at a Jesuit college. It was empty of fine distinctions and rich with the wisdom of the ages, like humus on a forest floor. I met members of the community and other priests who lived by these simpler rules, and they inspired me deeply. I was back in the Church.

My re-conversion continued in Washington DC, where I moved in late 1979 to join the staff of the World Bank. At first, my return to Catholicism took patience as I attended services in the venerable St. Matthew's Cathedral downtown, where JFK's funeral had taken place in 1963. Sunday services were flat and uninspiring compared with those in Paris. Except for those of the Archbishop, William Cardinal Hickey, which were dull but thoughtful, most sermons at the Cathedral were dreadful. One priest compared Jesus Christ to Superman; another laced his homilies with excerpts from the Proceedings of the American Psychological Association. I tuned them out by reading spiritual texts at that stage of the Mass.

Friends at Georgetown University asked me why I had not tried St. Augustine's parish at the corner of 15th and V Streets. I put off going until 1984; afterwards, I never looked back. The warmth that greeted newcomers at the door was enough to melt you into immediate membership. The fellowship, liturgy, music and preaching were all of the highest order. The Scriptures were read by members of the congregation -- some, but not all, professional broadcasters -- clearly, carefully and significantly. As it happened, everyone there was also a refugee from St. Matthew's, or at least

descendants of such refugees. St. Augustine's had been founded in 1858 by black Catholics, tired of being consigned to the back choir stall of the Cathedral. It was now known as "the Mother Church of African-American Catholics in the Nation's Capital" and was also famous for having introduced Gospel music to the Catholic liturgy in the early 1970s. The choir director, Leon Roberts, was nationally renowned as a composer and arranger; he had been born and raised a Pentecostal -- he was playing the organ for his preacher father at the age of nine -- but he said he knew from the day he saw a Catholic Mass on television in Philadelphia, very early on, that "Rome" would be his home.

On Sundays, I attended the 10:00 Mass as it was meditative and prayerful, with the Chorale singing traditional Anglo-Saxon hymns and black spirituals rather than the high-powered contemporary music which the Gospel Choir offered at the 12:30 Mass. But I would sometimes take visitors to the later service which made up in energy and infectious joy for what it lacked in contemplation. My first pastor, John Mudd, occasionally quoted popular books, like Scott Peck's The Road Less Traveled, but used them as a trampoline rather than crutch to enliven the Scriptural messages and bring them close to everyday life. His successor, Russell Dillard -- who, curiously enough, was the parish's first black pastor -- walked up and down the central aisle of the church during his homilies with a small microphone clipped to his vestments, exuding verbal and spiritual energy like a high school basketball player warming up for a difficult throw.

At St. Augustine's, we heard hymns which made light of individual differences:

In Christ there is no east or west
In him no south or north
But one great family bound by love
Throughout the whole wide earth.

A regular phrase from the pulpit was: "whether man or woman, black or white, straight or gay." Parishioners displayed every day what it meant to be "church" or the "people of God". Their values were so strong that the elder members of the community instilled them in the new priests from Day One. Guest preachers were exempt from these pressures, but clergy who came for a prolonged period were put through their paces. One new arrival made the mistake at his first Mass -- the calm, traditional 10:00 service -- of leading

the congregation in evangelical-sounding shouts of "Praise the Lord." Few followed him. He kept clapping his hands as the Chorale sang. Before he had even finished that first service, as he walked down the aisle, white-haired women parishioners told him rather impatiently: "Father, we're not Baptists here. We don't feel obliged to boast of our faith. As for the clapping, we became Catholics to put all of that behind us." Another neophyte, a rather stiff young white man, fresh from the seminary, intoned the texts of the Mass with outstretched hands from a large red book held in front of him by a younger member of the congregation. That did not last long. "Father," the old ladies teased him, "we're in the United States of America, not the Vatican." Their pride in their preferences, and their stubborn egalitarianism, gave new meaning to the Scriptures which echoed in those walls.

Much later, I joined the Music Ministry of the parish and sang at both Masses, enjoying every minute of the rehearsals two evenings a week and the seven hours of practice and singing every Sunday. This was an immersion in Christian service which surpassed even my five years in Catholic boarding school. Priest friends teased me that I was working harder on Sundays than they did! But it was also a taste of the universal Church I had come back to. When the two choirs were joined at Christmas and Easter, we sang spirituals and Gospel music but also Latin hymns and excerpts from Handel's Messiah. In 1990, we toured Italy and sang in Florence, Assisi and Rome -- including at Sunday Mass in St. Peter's and at one of John Paul II's weekly audiences. He invited the choir up to meet him and the smiles on all those African-American faces were radiant. My smile was special, too.

I was so at home in the parish that the choir director told me: "You know, Robert, you're now an African-American Catholic." "That's nice of you to say," I reacted, "but of course you're stretching a point. To begin with, I'm not black." "That doesn't matter," he insisted. "We all call ourselves Roman Catholics but none of us was born in Rome."

In Washington, I also met Mother Teresa. Between 1986 and 1989, I worked as a night volunteer every Thursday evening at an AIDS hospice, called "The Gift of Peace", which she had set up in the northeast of the city. Her Missionaries of Charity had an almost primitive notion of Christianity, the kind of faith which moved mountains, and an unswerving sense of obedience. One July day, which was sweltering even by local standards, Cardinal Hickey visited the hospice -- housed in a former orphanage donated by the Catholic Archdiocese. Looking at a thermostat, the Cardinal saw that

it was 105 degrees inside the hospice. Turning to the Mother Superior, he said: "Sister, there used to be air conditioning in this building. Is it out of order?" "No," she replied respectfully. "We're not accustomed to it in India and we did not feel we should spend money on the extra electricity." "But think of the residents," he remonstrated. From that day forward, the air conditioning was kept switched on at full blast. Some nights, I had to wear a sweater to compensate, and later in the year, someone had to tell the nuns to turn it off as winter approached.

The nuns also had strict rules -- which did not make the hospice very popular elsewhere in the city, especially with the gay community. Residents, some of whom were healthy enough to go out, were expected to be back by 7:00 in the evening. There was no television allowed on the premises, because of the violence, materialism, and impure thoughts it would convey. Volunteers were required to wear trousers -- even on hot nights before the air conditioning was re-discovered -- as shorts might lead to lewdness, too. And morphine was administered to the very sick only during their final hours and only after visiting doctors insisted on it as the obvious way of relieving pain.

Yet the sisters were a loving and inspiring group and they treated everyone as unique and precious. The Mother Superior, Sister Dolores, could have offered lessons to modern managers about how to bolster loyalty and morale, even among unpaid volunteers. The occasional Saturday morning (which was probably the only free time she had in the entire week), she would call me at home: "Robert, I thought you would like to know that our brother John whom you looked after on Thursday has gone to the Lord. You made his passing much easier. Please pray for him."

When I warned my boss at the World Bank, a Turk, that I might be a little bleary-eyed on Friday mornings, he asked how many people there were at the hospice. I told him that it had just opened and had a capacity of 25, but for the time being there were only three residents. "Is it really worth the effort to help so few people?" he asked me. I found myself quoting Mother Teresa: "We may just be a drop in the ocean, but without us there wouldn't be that drop."

Mother Teresa visited the hospice twice. Both times, I was relieved that she didn't look me in the eye and say, like Christ: "Come, follow me." She was a person of such compelling strength in her little frame that I would

indeed have dropped everything and followed her. Even more remarkable, for a woman who seemed to represent an unwavering Christian tradition, was her deep commitment to serving people suffering from HIV/AIDS. While some evangelical preachers in the United States and Africa regarded the disease as a “God-sent” scourge on the impious, she expressed the view that her whole life had been a preparation for helping the world confront the epidemic. She was indifferent to the fact that most of the sick in this hospice and others she was founding around the world were drug takers or homosexuals; to her, they were her brothers and sisters, or perhaps (because she was so traditional) her “children.” She could have ignored the problem or left it to others. She had enough to do, housing the unsheltered and the dying in India or campaigning against abortion in Europe and North America. But she jumped right in and saw Christ in those who were dying of the disease.

The purity of her instincts became even clearer when a group of young people from Opus Dei -- the elitist and secretive conservative group featured in the best-selling novel The Da Vinci Code -- joined us as volunteers one evening. I had my reservations about them, but opened my mind and heart to them. The hospice was now full, and every extra set of arms was welcome. But they spent most of the night in the chapel rather than changing diapers. Over coffee, I learned that they had come, not in a spirit of Christian service or sacrifice, but rather as an act of self-mortification. All white and well-bred, it was clearly an effort for them to be at such close quarters with mostly black men who were either gay or drug addicts or both. They barely lasted a week and never came back.

Serving at the hospice was the most satisfying “work” I have ever done. Even washing the dishes after meals seemed significant. And, as many wise people have observed over the centuries, I received much more than I gave in the process.

Being Gay

Now, how can I have spent so much time introducing myself without getting to the fact that I am gay? I suppose one reason is that, while it is an important part of my personality, my sexuality is probably less important than my being a Christian or a Catholic. It is also less relevant to the purpose of this letter than the other facts and experiences I have already related. I accepted my sexuality during the years I left the Church and hence struggled

with that challenge out of the shadow of official teachings and constraints. I also accepted it so completely -- thanks to the good influence and example of others -- that there was never any question of my submitting the subject to anyone else's approval. I needed the Church's blessing of my homosexuality as much as I needed its condoning of my sense of humor, my Italian heritage, or my choice of friends. Church and loving also came together in the year I spent in Paris.

On my fourth evening in France, over dinner in an apartment close to Notre Dame, I met a former monk of the community of St. Gervais, where I went to Mass every Sunday. He was now studying to be a priest at the Catholic seminary of Issy-les-Moulineaux south of Paris. During that year, we became very close -- much closer, in fact, than we imagined, until I left Paris a year later to move to Washington. Within hours of being apart, we felt a great hole in our existence. From the start, neither of us expected to make a life together. He was going to be a priest and I was going to move back to North America. When I left, Jean Daniel decided against becoming a priest and entered the Benedictine monastery at Mont St. Michel. From there, he started writing me letters every few days and eventually asked if he could join me in the States. I answered that he had made a choice and he should try to live with it for at least two years before changing his mind again. I was worried about causing him to lose his religious vocation. I urged him to be as strong as the mammoth stone columns in the 11th century Abbey church where he prayed each day.

Eventually, his patience -- and my rationality -- ran out. He explained the situation to his superior, who lent him the monastery's car to drive down to Paris and meet me, on my way to a business trip in East Africa. In a small hotel on the Ile St. Louis, we spent 24 hours in bed -- mainly talking. We decided to live together and were both nervous about it. Part of this was what the normal sense of responsibility that any serious couple would feel before marrying. Would we be up to caring for each other and having the wisdom to accept each other's faults and build on each other's strengths for the rest of our lives? Part of our concern was also the unknown. How would our being a couple be accepted at the office? And how would we deal with US immigration rules that in 1980 still made homosexuality (like drug dealing, Communism and mental illness) grounds for refusing entry?

Everything worked out, and we have been together for over 28 years. In 2003, after moving back to Canada, we decided to enter into a civil union

and, as soon as the law allowed it, a full civil marriage. We didn't need to do this. For tax and inheritance purposes, Canadian regulations recognized us as common-law spouses, the day we arrived, but we wanted to celebrate our time together, and the new marriage law, in a public ceremony. Here was the new Quebec at its best. The law allowing civil unions (and later marriages) between same-sex partners was passed by the provincial parliament in February 2002 by a vote of 125-0. In a jurisdiction once dominated -- and dictated to -- by the Roman Catholic Church, there was not a single dissenting voice on this signature social issue. The law was declared effective on Quebec's "national" holiday, June 24th -- which was the Feast of St. John the Baptist. My own sense of how normal our life was as a couple was echoed by a law that made the matter almost banal. For our civil union, the government had not even changed the forms. We had to strike out the word "wife" on one side of the form and replace it with a second "husband."

As I have said earlier, this letter is not about being a gay Catholic. My purpose is to raise other matters which I regard as important for the Church. But I need to dwell on this subject a little longer.

Why do I -- and many others -- feel comfortable about being Christian and gay? Some readers will think the phrase "gay Catholic" a contradiction in terms. "He cannot be a practicing Catholic and a 'practicing' gay. And if he is a real Catholic, he should not be describing himself that way. He should be self-conscious about it, and even ashamed."

But that would mean I should also be ashamed of my body, which is a rather important part of God's creation. I grew up a bookworm and never looked after my physical self, except under the stern eye of teachers in the tedious gym activities at school. It was only at Oxford that the Latin advice "Mens sana in corpore sano" ["A sound mind in a sound body"] hit home to me. Ever since, I have looked after the whole of my self, remained physically active, and tried to listen to my body almost as much as my inner thoughts. I know this line of reasoning can be taken to an extreme. Attention to the body does not mean giving in to its every urge, any more than heeding your conscience means acting on every thought that comes into your head. In fact, the "mens sana" principle suggests that we should not abuse the body with over-eating, over-drinking, over-working, smoking, idleness, and even too much sex. But when my sexual identity became an issue, I knew that denying or suppressing it would be bad for all of me -- as well as for everyone I knew and loved and wanted to serve.

Doesn't being gay entail an abuse of the body, though? Hardly. The "homosexual act" continues to mystify, fascinate, or repel in the same way love between our parents seemed impure to many of us when we were first learned the details as children. There are only a certain number of ways in which grown-ups can show affection or give physical pleasure to each other and this is one of them -- for heterosexuals and homosexuals alike. But it is not the *only* way of expressing affection. I know of one highly committed and well-adjusted same-sex couple that has never had intercourse in over a quarter-century of life together. Most couples everywhere find simpler ways of being together, including simply cuddling in each other's arms at night.

Is having sex for pleasure rather than procreation an offence in itself? I can't see how. I know of no one -- outside the Vatican -- who would question the human, and even practical, importance of enjoying sex. If the Church were consistent in its teaching, it would insist on fertility tests before marriage, as couples incapable of having children would be making love for no reason.

Here is where the Church's obsession with sex gets the institution into trouble in the modern era. Even in ancient times, other religions have been more relaxed with this aspect of the human person. One can still see scenes from the Kama Sutra sculpted on the walls of 11th century Indian temples -- intended specifically to expose young people to aspects of life they might not learn about in other ways. Holy Father, forgive me for using a Hindu parallel. The point is that other major religions -- whatever we think of them -- have been more grown up about the subject, without promoting sexual license and delinquency.

Another way of looking at this is through the eyes of Jean Vanier: "The truth is also in the 'earth' of our own bodies. So it is a question of moving from theories we have learned to listening to the reality that is in and around us. Truth flows from the earth. This is not to deny the truth that flows from teachers, from books, from tradition, from our ancestors, and from religious faith. But the two must come together. Truth from the sky must be confirmed and strengthened by truth from the earth."¹³

Why are the Church and many Christians (and many Hindus as well, it must be said) offended by homosexuality or, more recently, gay "marriage"? Certainly, there are few direct references to it in the Bible, and

those in the Book of Leviticus appear alongside other proscriptions inspired by hygiene rather than moral wisdom (like the advice against eating shrimps). There is certainly a longstanding taboo against it, which some would argue is deep in the human consciousness (best seen in Africa, where the phobia remains very strong). But this taboo turns to dust when you discover that you, or your brother or daughter, are gay.

As most people under the age of 35 now recognize – and indeed, in developed societies this issue is now a function of age and temperament rather than morality or politics -- being gay is not a matter of choice. The only choice is to embrace it, or not. If it were a choice, many gay people would have made a different one, if only for simplicity's sake. It is not easy to swim against the tide, or be the potential target of discrimination and even hatred. The fact that homosexuality is as natural as physical height, or strength, or creativity makes it much easier to accept than it would be otherwise. If one looks beyond the prejudice and pitfalls one has to navigate in some surroundings, there is joy in being homosexual. And in relations with others, it is as relevant or irrelevant as you want to make it. Some regard it as casually as having curly hair; others see it as more central and defining. But it is an aspect of a person. Not a challenge. Not a threat. Not contagious. And certainly not -- unless curly hair can be considered alluring and potentially compromising -- a sin.

Gay marriage is nothing more than two people wanting to commit to living together publicly. Wouldn't "civil unions" be a more discreet way of describing them? Yes, but that is a matter of political tactics and semantics rather than a difference in substance or logic. In countries like France, where there is a true separation of Church and State, couples marry twice -- once before a public official and, then (if they want to), before a priest, minister or rabbi. Very few gay people have sought a church blessing for their marriages -- although many would certainly appreciate and be strengthened by it. It is civil marriage that most of them are seeking, and only a minority has taken advantage of new laws which offer even that. There is nothing disrespectful or subversive of traditional marriage in this -- except in the minds of those with a taste for conspiracy or hidden agendas. The real "gay agenda" is very straightforward -- sharing in the same responsibilities and protections that governments offer to other couples. Many of them experience the same love which you described so beautifully in your Encyclical: "No longer is it self-seeking, a sinking in the intoxication of happiness; instead it seeks the good

of the beloved: it becomes renunciation and it is ready, and even willing, for sacrifice.”¹⁴

The threat to traditional marriage comes from other angles. Divorce rates remain high across Europe and North America. Half the babies in societies like France and Quebec are born to unmarried parents. Against this background, the interest of same-sex couples in forging formal links with one another should be good news for society rather than perceived as a dark cloud on the horizon. Homosexuals -- like heterosexuals -- are quite capable of being monogamous and faithful and even setting a good example for others. In these circumstances, can anyone suggest credibly that gay *civil* marriages will make this situation worse?

In his book *Our Endangered Values: America's Moral Crisis* (2005), the former US President Jimmy Carter links divorce and homosexuality, but only to show up the selective nature of some Christian criticism of same-sex unions. He opposes tampering with the US Constitution but points out that, instead of just defining marriage as the union of a man and woman, a more biblically authentic version of a possible constitutional amendment would be: “Adultery and divorce are condemned, and marriage is defined as a legal and spiritual union between a man and a woman until they are parted by death.”¹⁵ Referring to the high divorce rate in Western societies, he adds: “There are many reasons for this threat to the sanctity of matrimonial vows, but few would regard homosexuality as a significant factor in this multitude of failed marriages.”¹⁶

The Church's discomfort with sex -- and with homosexuality in particular -- has many roots, but it is one thing to be ill at ease and quite another to be doctrinaire. Unblinking moral positions are a comfort to some but annoying to many others, and they are arguably incompatible with Christ's own impatience with inherited truths. A March 2006 letter to the editor of the Montreal French-language paper *Le Devoir* expressed this concern quite beautifully: “Churches that do not respect the unfathomable mystery of every human being are doomed to losing followers one by one. Some of the Catholic Church's positions are at odds with the most hope-filled parts of the Gospel message. Why do Church leaders allow the faithful to bow before them and even genuflect and kiss their hands, when it is plainly written: ‘I came not to be served but to serve.’ Why is there such a gap between the dogmas and laws of the Church of Rome and the struggle of so many human communities to respect the rights and destiny of every

human being? Who can pretend to possess the whole truth? The Gospel rejects comfortable positions and facile certitudes and constantly urges us to share our love with others. And the Gospel never defined the different faces of love.”¹⁷

Church views on homosexuality have wounded many devout Christians unnecessarily. I try to understand those views as an accident of history and tradition, the product of cultural and intellectual lags made all the worse by the element of primal taboo involved. It is like the people Columbus left behind in Europe when he set out to discover the New World, fond of their terra firma, unadventurous but not stupid. There was more harm in possibly falling off the edge of the earth than apparent gain in moving forward. The Church has never led the charge for change. Leo XIII recognized the social and moral importance of the trade union movement -- 50 years after it was founded. John Paul II apologized for the Inquisition 500 years after it ended.

In addition to my historical view, it has to be admitted that the Church’s position is actually more sophisticated and kinder than that of some other Christian confessions – not to mention non-Christian ones. The former religion correspondent for the *New York Times*, Peter Steinfels, has said that he never encountered the visceral reaction to homosexuality among Catholic leaders that he often did among evangelicals. Nor did he see much support among Catholics for “converting” gay and lesbian individuals to heterosexuality.¹⁸ (When my twin brother told me that his Baptist parish in Vancouver had a club of “ex-gays,” I asked him where they handed in their membership cards.) It is also true that Christian discomfort with homosexuality is part of a larger concern, a proxy for all sex (including premarital relations) not directly related to having children.¹⁹

All the same, despite my effort to be understanding, even I am aghast at how insensitive the Church can be. A striking example was John Paul II’s description of homosexual unions, in one of the last of his writings, *Memory and Identity* (2005), as one of the “great violations of God’s law.” Referring to pressure from the European Parliament to recognize such unions, your predecessor wondered “whether this is not the work of another ideology of evil more subtle and hidden, perhaps, intent upon exploiting human rights themselves against man and the family.”²⁰ The notion that gay men and women have to suppress an important part of their being -- to be celibate even if they don’t become priests -- is so contrary to their own sense of

natural law, so inimical to their own, and more general, notions of love, as to make them wonder whether they read the same Scriptures or recite the same prayers. And how can love -- if it is faithful, respectful, considerate, and unselfish -- ever be evil?

“Well,” I can hear you thinking, “this is a very convenient line of thinking, worthy of the slipshod moral advice Renaissance confessors gave to their wealthy and powerful patrons. It is no better than ‘cafeteria’ Christianity -- taking the parts which are pleasing and dropping those which are unpleasant or demanding. Catholicism is something whole, not a collection of bits and pieces.”

My Faith

In fact, even though I believe that personal choice enhances rather than weakens religious faith, I am a rather conventional Catholic. I go to Mass on Sundays, not because I feel *obliged* to do so but rather because I am eager to hear the Scriptures, reflect, pray, and be strengthened by the Eucharist. Apart from my comfort with being gay, I am as close to the mainstream of Western Christianity as a person can get. I believe the Church’s teaching on birth control is wrong, and even cruel -- but so do most Christians, including many evangelical Protestants, whose view of the world, rather paradoxically, sometimes approaches that of Vatican hardliners. Few Roman Catholics with a modicum of education feel obliged to respect this wrongheaded policy -- because that is all it is, a policy rather than revealed truth, based on abstruse reflections on actual and potential life by Church thinkers like St. Augustine (354-430) and St. Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) rather than Christ’s teachings. I have seen Catholic nuns distribute condoms to girls in African villages -- preaching abstinence but knowing that those young women would be the targets of sexual advances from domineering or exploitative men. I knew that those nuns were doing God’s work. Not blocking potential life, but preventing probable death (from HIV/AIDS).

In other respects, my beliefs are predictable, even humdrum. I believe that serving others is our most important purpose in life. I spent more than twenty years at the World Bank -- the UN agency which is the largest single source of foreign aid -- not just because sharing economic wealth and opportunity in the world seemed important in its own right, but also because that mission was consistent with my Christian values. In March 2000, in

Nairobi, Kenya, I organized with the Council of Anglican Provinces of Africa a meeting between senior Bank staff and church leaders from 21 countries and 19 Christian denominations to discuss ways we could work together to reduce poverty. In a joint statement following the conference, the World Bank president Jim Wolfensohn and Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey expressed the conviction that “no one is truly well off while others are desperately poor, and that the world’s knowledge and opportunities should be available to all.”²¹

Although “charity begins at home,” it is sometimes harder to help one’s immediate neighbor than people on the other side of the world. I once knew a woman who was so tired working at soup kitchens every evening that she seemed to go out of her way to be impatient and unpleasant with her colleagues at the office during the day. One of my staff was once honest enough to tell me that I was not always very “Christian” towards her. But trying to live by the Golden Rule -- “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” -- remains for me the central challenge of Christianity. Almost as difficult is Jesus’ injunction: “Judge not, that you may not also be judged.” On that score, the staunchest Catholics -- or Baptists or Presbyterians -- can be very poor Christians at times.

My favorite prayers are the well-known ones -- Mary’s “Magnificat”:

...He has shown might in His arm
He has scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart
He has put down the mighty from their seat
And has exalted the humble
He has filled the hungry with good things
And the rich He has sent away...

St. Francis of Assisi’s “Make Me an Instrument of Thy Peace”:

...Lord, grant that I may seek not so much
To be understood as to understand
To be consoled as to console
To be loved as to love,
For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

And Mother Teresa's prayer, which includes the words: "Let us thus praise you in the way you love best, by shining on those around us. Let us preach you without preaching, not by words but by our example, by the catching force, the sympathetic influence of what we do, the evident fullness of the love our hearts bear to you. Amen." Occasionally, I add: "May I have the strength to be gentle and the intelligence to be humble."

On "human life" issues, I come down firmly on the side of Catholic teaching. I abhor abortion and believe that most mothers who resort to it are probably scarred by it for the rest of their lives. But, apart from actively discouraging it, I do not believe the State or Church should interfere in individual judgments on the matter. I oppose research into human cloning for no very rational reason -- except respect for the sanctity of the human person. For the same reason, I oppose capital punishment as well as unnecessary wars, like the 2003 invasion of Iraq. And I hesitate to support euthanasia even though, in extreme cases, I can see that an individual can reconcile this ending of life with his or her own moral beliefs. But again, as for abortion, I believe that people should be free to make their own decisions in this intimate area.

By implication, I am not very evangelical (hence my liking of Mother Teresa's "let us preach you without preaching"). I believe that every person must find his or her own path, encouraged by others they meet along the way, and above all avoid the dangers of blind certitude and self-righteousness. The suicide bombers of the 21st century are not very different from the Crusaders of old. Having "right" on one's side may be reassuring to some but annoying, suspect, and even threatening to others.

One reason for hesitation is that my own faith -- like that of many Christians and, in the past, even many saints -- is sometimes as fragile as a flower. The heat of other people's ardor is more likely to wilt it than revive it, and I assume that that is true for others. Perhaps, I am too respectful of human nature, like the 19th century English pastor who considered himself fortunate to be in a parish where there was no "outbreak" of religion or "sudden salvation," just those who "got it gradually over eighty years of drowsy Sundays."²² Or perhaps I have been instinctively drawn to the truth you expressed in your Encyclical: "A pure and generous love is the best witness to the God in whom we believe."²³

Above all, I believe that Christians should combine humility with a sense of humor. The 19th century English writer William Hazlitt was scathing about intolerance. He knew something about it, as his father was a Dissenting preacher, with enormous gifts of oratory and perhaps also the tendency to use cut-and-dried categories about people:

“What a strange being man is! Not content with doing all he can to vex and hurt his fellows here, ‘upon this bank and shoal of time’, where one would think there were heart-aches, pains, disappointment, anguish, tears, sighs, and groans enough, the bigoted maniac takes him to the high peak of school-divinity to hurl him down the yawning gulf of penal fire... The cannibals burn their enemies and eat them in good fellowship with one another: meek Christian divines cast those who differ from them but a hair’s breadth, body and soul into hell fire for the glory of God and the good of His creatures!”²⁴

Samuel Butler put it differently in The Way of All Flesh: “To me it seems that those who are happy in this world are better and more lovable people than those who are not, and that thus in the event of a Resurrection and Day of Judgment, they will be the most likely to be deemed worthy of a heavenly mansion.”²⁵

I am a Christian first and a Catholic second, as the differences between denominations seem to me trivial compared with the major beliefs we have in common. I am Catholic because I was brought up that way and, after ten years away from the Church, rediscovered the simple beauty of Christ’s life and teachings. What the Church -- and human beings -- have done with those teachings is a sad and almost unforgivable story. Who can condone the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition? And when your predecessor had to apologize for such past abuses, what more can one say? But there is a radiance in the Gospels and the use which good men and women have made of them over the centuries, that I want to be part of a universal institution devoted to that faith and those ideals.

Of course, there are limits to the criticisms one can make of the Church and still claim to be Christian. One cannot reject the word of God, question dogmas of the faith firmly rooted in Scripture, doubt the apostolic structure of the Church, and be skeptical about the sacraments.²⁶ But there are aspects of the internal organization of the Church that are long overdue for discussion and change, and those are the subject of this Letter.

In writing this, I hope that I will express the beliefs of others who have not had the time, the background, or perhaps the impertinence to put their own thoughts on paper. And it is not just Westerners accustomed to challenging authority or questioning some inherited truths who are eager for reform in the Church. A woman from Burundi, named Marguerite Barankitse, who has been described as an African Mother Teresa for establishing a network of shelters for over 10,000 young people, has said that she has two “sick relatives”, her country and the Church. She also pokes fun at the small number of people attending Mass in France: “You’d think the churches refused to admit anyone under 50.”²⁷ Those empty churches and ageing congregations are a sign of a widening problem which cries out for attention.

I now want to come to the heart of my concerns. I want to appeal to you to promote Christian unity more intensively, let priests marry, open all the Church’s ministries (including the priesthood) to women, and be merciful to divorced Catholics.

This is an ambitious agenda -- but one which has seemed obvious to millions of Roman Catholics around the world for more than a generation. If I raise them, it is because, in the words of one theologian, the development of Church law “is not only the work of scholars and prelates; it is also the responsibility in a certain way of all those whom the Lord graces with faith and a sharing in its sacramental life.”²⁸

The profound changes in the life of the Church during my lifetime are another reason for raising these issues. In 1965, about 65 percent of US Catholics attended Mass every Sunday; in 2002, the rate was about 34 percent. There was only one priest for every 1,900 parishioners, compared with one for every 800 in 1965. In 1965, there were no married or single men ordained as permanent deacons and almost no laypeople involved in pastoral work. In 2002, there were almost 14,000 permanent deacons and another 14,000 full-time lay “ecclesial” ministers.²⁹ Up to a point, the Church has adapted to the falling number of churchgoers and priests, but inadequately in my view and at a tremendous cost.

I’ll broach the four subjects of this Letter one at a time.

Christian Unity

You have said yourself that it is “a scandal to the world”³⁰ that two thousand years after the birth of Christ, almost one thousand years after the schism between the Western and Eastern Churches, and five hundred years after the Protestant Reformation, so little has been done to repair the rifts among those who believe that Christ was God and Man. How can we justify these divisions and still call ourselves “Christians”?

Certainly, Christians are entitled to live or express their faith differently, even within the same city or parish (like the 10:00 and 12:30 Masses at St. Augustine’s in Washington, DC, which I described earlier). I would be the first to object to buttonholing people on the street and asking them if they have “discovered” Christ if that became a central obligation of a united Christian church. (Even as a Christian, I have felt such overtures obnoxious, and doubly so when I have responded “yes” and then been asked “But have you found the *real* Christ?”) There is already wide latitude within the Catholic Church for individual expression and cultural adaptation of liturgy and ritual which honors the spirit of the Second Vatican Council and John Paul II’s own energetic efforts to reach out to all parts of the Catholic world. This is a strength but also a challenge. If we can accept such diversity within the Catholic Church, how can we stop short of full union with other Christian faiths?

Part of the reason is prejudice -- in both directions. Some of this can be amusing. Several members of the Gospel choir I sang with in the early 1990s were Pentecostals, still thinking about full “conversion” to the Roman faith. Their parents were rather shocked that they would even set foot in a Catholic church, let alone sing at their Masses. “Those Catholics are allowed to do everything,” the mother of one of them said. “Dance, drink, gamble, and so on. About the only thing they’re forbidden to do is eat fish on Friday.” (Of course, even that prohibition was no longer in force when she uttered this.)

Some prejudice is simple misunderstanding. Protestant suspicion of Catholic “idolatry” -- based on the visible aids to meditation and prayer in our churches -- can seem misplaced. The worship of the Blessed Sacrament is indeed strange to people who do not believe in the real presence of God in the Host. And even lifelong Catholics have been embarrassed by excesses of

adoration, like Portuguese women licking the stone steps of holy places, Filipino pilgrims being crucified or flagellated during Passion Week, or Greek Orthodox women throwing their bodies on the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. Many Catholics in North America and Northern Europe have felt quite “Protestant” gazing on such scenes.

The history of the Church is far from glorious, and some non-Catholics are still stuck in the lessons they were taught by Martin Luther and John Calvin rather than willing to look on a renewed Catholic Church with fresh eyes. They will need some help in bridging the divide. After all, as the German theologian Hans Kūng has rightly asked, how many of us can imagine Jesus Christ attending a papal mass at St. Peter’s in Rome?³¹ The corruption of some of your predecessors remains something which many Protestants and a good number of Catholics cannot understand. Perhaps the worst examples are from the tenth century, when the ‘senatoress’ Marosia was the mistress of one pope (Sergius III), murderess of a second (John X) and mother of a third (her illegitimate son John XI).³² The Western church provoked hatred rather than love well before the Reformation. The Fourth Crusade (launched in 1204) never set foot in the Holy Land; instead, it pillaged the seat of the Eastern Church in Constantinople for three days, slaughtering cattle in the precincts of Santa Sophia and having a prostitute “preach” from the pulpit.³³ Three hundred years later, in the late 16th century Spanish Catholics felt perfectly comfortable -- even uplifted -- murdering French Calvinists in Florida in the name of religious orthodoxy, while also seizing their territories for Spain. These poor victims had already fled religious persecution in France.³⁴

Is it surprising, then, that many Protestants have harbored deep suspicion and even hatred of Rome? Having been spared such prejudice in my own education – what we were told was that non-Catholics were mistaken, not miscreants -- I cringe, or smile, at extreme examples of Protestant invective. Even in a comfortable and civilized household that produced one of the most enlightened Christian writers of the 20th century (C.S. Lewis), the level of anti-Catholic hyperbole was extraordinary. Lewis’s grandfather, a bishop in the Church of Ireland, thought the Roman church was “composed of the Devil’s children.”³⁵ His nurse, taking him for a walk, would urge the young Lewis to avoid puddles “full of dirty wee popes.”³⁶ Can you imagine such nonsense? This was Belfast, to be sure, but in relatively peaceful times (1898-1905), before the Irish Troubles and the

using of religious differences as grounds for machine-gunning or blowing up your neighbor.

I try to be understanding about this prejudice. After all, who has done the most offending over the years? Certainly, Henry VIII and Elizabeth I persecuted English Catholics. But, in between their two reigns, the Catholic Mary Tudor (known as “Bloody Mary” to her contemporaries) burnt the first Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury at the stake. In all the history of Christian divisions and rivalry, there was no Protestant Inquisition. Open-minded Christians of all denominations can understand why violence and suppression in the past have led to Protestant resentment of Catholicism.

Catholics, too, have their prejudices. For example, they are inclined to consider other Christian dominations as lightweight or misguided -- even though many would be at pains to explain the differences between various confessions or what is essential to the Catholic faith. I cross myself automatically when I enter Anglican or Protestant churches, out of respect for the holiness of these places and the communities which worship there; but I have to fight the prejudice that God is somehow less “present” there than in the Catholic church up the street. At Easter, in 1974, I visited a friend in Londonderry, Northern Ireland. Waiting for the bus in Belfast, I learned that the town center had been cordoned off because the police were trying to defuse a 500-pound bomb in the main street, planted there by the Irish Republican Army (IRA). I plunged deep into my seat on the bus, hoping we would slip out of the city unhurt. On arrival, my friend picked me up in his car and drove me to his parents’ house in the Catholic stronghold of the “Bogside”, past barricades manned by gunmen in black balaclavas who were protecting the neighborhood from British soldiers and Protestant extremists. I felt reassured when I saw a picture of Pope John XXIII in the guest toilet that evening. These are the silly remnants of centuries of division, suspicion, and inertia.

Fortunately, some Protestant churches have made great strides in seeking closer communion with the Roman Catholic faith. This is slightly surprising, given the lack of encouragement they have had from the Catholic Church since the death of Paul VI in 1978. Some years ago, I attended a Lutheran Eucharistic service in a small town in Pennsylvania which was hard to distinguish from a Catholic Mass. After some discussion with the church’s elders, the pastor (who was a woman) also commissioned an icon of St. John the Evangelist for the church from my partner, Jean Daniel, who

had learned to paint such religious images when he was in the monastery. She invited us to the blessing of the icon, which hangs in the church still -- even though the pastor later moved on to become a bishop elsewhere in the state.

Taking such risks -- fighting prejudice while respecting different traditions -- should surely be part of the daily work of Christian leaders. But I am saddened by the extent to which some smaller denominations traffic in ignorant stereotypes of Catholics (as if defining themselves by what they are *not*) and by the way the largest Church (my own) seems immobile, like a mountain expecting the wayward birds to fly home to it.

Now, I know it is easy for someone like me to be open to other Christian faiths. For one thing, I lived quite happily for ten years without any formal faith in my head, and that detachment put the differences between confessions into stark perspective. We believe in Christ and His teachings. Everything else is a detail after that. I am also, as I said earlier, disinclined to advertise my faith or convert anyone. Sometimes, I fear that I am letting someone down -- perhaps even Christ Himself, who urged us to preach his message to "all nations" -- but my own assessment of His other teachings make me cautious. Few passages in the New Testament are as vivid to me as the Gospel that is read every Ash Wednesday, at the beginning of Lent:

"When you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth; they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you... When you pray, go into your room... When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting." [Matthew, 6:1-6, 16-18]³⁷

Accordingly, when I leave church that day, I rub the ashes off my forehead with a handkerchief -- discreetly, so as not to shock anyone. I know the ashes are intended as a public sign of our own mortality and sinfulness, but I find the risk of spiritual boastfulness greater than the benefits of inspiring others to think of their own souls.

There is another reason for not being too evangelical. William Buckley, Jr. has pointed out that we take most of our satisfactions from

features of *this* world, such as “the love of our family, the company of our friends, the feel of the wind on the face, the excitement of the printed page, the delights of color and form and sound; food, wine, sex.” As human beings, we experience another life which, in the Christian vision, recalls to us continuously that God loves us. “That other world reminds us of our blessing and reproves us for our dumb failure to share it with others.”³⁸ But it is “the protocols of secular life”, or respect for the privacy of others, that get in the way.

Of course, Christians need fellowship. The word “church” itself -- from *Kirche* in German and *kyriake* in Greek -- means the house or the community of the Lord, and in the Romance languages (*ecclesia*, *iglesia*, *chiesa*, *église*) it comes from the Greek word *ekklesia*, which is used in the New Testament to mean assembly (of God).³⁹ It is part of our faith to pray together, and we draw strength and inspiration from group worship. But it hardly seems enough to worship just with other Roman Catholics -- even though we are 1.2 billion in the world. Obviously, there are a number of stumbling blocks to re-establishing the Christian community, such as the meaning of the Eucharist, papal infallibility, and our devotion to Mary. We cannot wish these differences away, but we can certainly examine them in a respectful light.

Belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist is one of the central defining elements of being a Catholic. Most Protestants regard communion as a commemorative reenactment of the Last Supper rather than as an actual *repetition* of the Savior’s transformation of bread and wine into His own body and blood. Christ’s words in the upper room that night -- “Do this in remembrance of me” -- have been interpreted very differently. For Catholics, Christ said “do this” not “imitate this”: for Protestants, the emphasis is on “remembrance.”

Yet there is a wide range of views among Christians about Christ’s presence in the world, let alone the Eucharist. My Anglican college chaplain at Oxford once admitted that he did not believe in a personal God, i.e., one who intervened directly in human affairs. Even though a near-agnostic at the time, I was scandalized by this. I wondered about the meaning of the prayers he led so genially in chapel every day. His pastoral instincts were just as weak. Running into my mother and me in the street one day, he asked why we were glum. I explained that, the day before, my elder brother had been sentenced to five years in prison for smuggling hashish into the UK. “He

deserves it,” the chaplain said rather smugly, in front of the house where John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, had lived and preached in the 18th century. My mother’s modest upbringing and lack of formal education never got in the way of a healthy attitude to authority. She let him have it between the eyes. “And you call yourself a man of God?” she answered him with a withering stare. He wandered away, a little shaken, across the cobblestones.

At the other extreme is an eighty-year old friend of mine in France, who knew the difference between real and unreal presences and was prepared to face the consequences. He was baptized a Catholic, but was of Swiss Protestant descent and had deeply anti-clerical parents. At the age of eighteen, when he announced his decision to study for the priesthood, his parents packed his bags within minutes and expelled him from the house. He was a brilliant intellectual and, at the same time, a man of uncompromising principle. After five years as a priest, he confessed emerging doubts about the Real Presence to his bishop, who told not him to let that bother him; many other priests faced the same problem and were living with it. My friend exploded. “You idiot!” he told the bishop. “I suppose you also expect me to preach to the faithful something I don’t believe in myself?” And he walked out of the bishop’s office, and the priesthood, then and there.

Joseph Campbell, the authority on myths, once commented on how reverently Catholics approach the communion rail; they behave the way they believe, he thought.⁴⁰ They are not theologians, but they have been trained from childhood to believe that there is no act more solemn and central to the Catholic faith than receiving the Eucharist. But, shorn of theological jargon and caveats, the doctrine of Transubstantiation -- that priests convert bread and wine into Christ’s body and blood -- does not imply that there has been any *physical* change in the earthly substances. The change is a *spiritual* one.

Even that is a difficult thing to believe, and many Catholics are obliged to renew this aspect of their faith every time they bow their heads at the Consecration. But, if one steps back for a minute -- as I have done in writing this letter -- what is so difficult and divisive about this belief? Why should it define Catholics to the exclusion of other Christians, who also believe that Christ is present when they pray together and, if pressed, would assert that Christ may also be present in the wafer and wine they take during their own Eucharistic services, if only because He is present everywhere? And how large is the difference between that general presence and Christ’s *greater* presence in the Host or the Tabernacle?

Now, I do not want to reduce this beautiful and central mystery of our faith to a mere intellectual curiosity. That would be like imagining a bird without its wings. But why should this important tenet of our faith become a stumbling block to greater Christian unity? Would it not be better to open Catholic communion to all Christians, reminding them what Roman Catholics believe and leaving it to their consciences to decide whether to share in this mystery or not? What sacrilege would there be if Anglicans or Protestants took Catholic communion as reverently as they do in their own churches while still struggling to develop the full confidence of Catholics in the Real Presence?

Papal infallibility raises a different set of issues and has been the butt of jokes and resentment, not just disagreement, among Protestants. Of course, it is ridiculous to think that you or your predecessors have always been right about everything. But that is not what the doctrine of papal infallibility teaches. It was introduced rather recently in the life of the Church -- at the First Vatican Council in 1869-70 -- and refers only to matters of faith and morals when the Holy Father makes formal pronouncements on these subjects from his special chair (*ex cathedra*) in St. Peter's Basilica. Popes have used this special power only twice, once in 1854 to declare the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary and, again, in 1950, to proclaim the doctrine of the Assumption of the Virgin, body and soul, into heaven. Like many other doctrines, they are mysteries -- i.e., things we do not, and may not be intended to, understand. They certainly do not affect Catholic behavior and are not central to the moral teachings of the Church.

All other papal opinions, including those expressed in the Holy Father's letters, or encyclicals, are just that. They are wise, well-founded, and considerate compositions, reflecting centuries of sober consideration by other popes, saints and theologians -- but still just opinions. Protestants and Catholics can disagree with parts of them without risking eternal perdition. Inevitably, given the general language in which most of them are couched, and the deep Christian values which inspire them, I have agreed with ninety-five percent of the encyclicals I have read. But the other five percent has been about important subjects like birth control.

Of course, some people will deny that one can have legitimate differences with the Holy See. In October 1991, standing by the Spanish

ambassador's swimming pool at a steamy diplomatic reception in Abidjan, the capital of the Ivory Coast, I boasted to the Papal Nuncio that I had just come from an interesting meeting in Paris. Three international organizations, the World Bank, the United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organization (UNESCO), and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) had discussed John Paul II's encyclical *Centesimo Anno*, written to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of Leo XIII's progressive letter *De Rerum Novarum* [*Of New Things*]. It was a "first" for these three highly influential but determinedly non-confessional organizations. When I had finished talking, the Nuncio, who, like the Pope, was Polish, replied: "You *discussed* a papal encyclical? Encyclicals are doctrine and not for debate." This man expressed what has been called the "maximalist" view of papal authority, the notion of almost two "real presences" -- that of the silent, hidden Christ in the Eucharist and that of the teaching, visible Christ in the Pope.⁴¹ I will come back to this matter a little later.

Such narrow thinking will not bring Christians together. Nor will talk of "idolatry" and "superstition." Protestants wonder why Catholics are so obsessed with the Blessed Virgin Mary and question the need for a Marian "cult." Catholics, no less than Protestants or Jews or Muslims, believe there is no substitute for direct contemplation of God. The statues of saints and the representations of Mary are mere reminders of His greatness for the distracted or visually minded. Any "worship" of these images is a serious sin, ranking alongside murder and adultery in the Ten Commandments. And why should Mary be omnipresent in Catholic churches? Shortly before he died, my Baptist brother asked me in an e-mail: "Why do we need a Mediatrix when we already have the ultimate Intermediary in Christ?"

Most Catholics think very little about this. It is like asking why most children are so close to their mothers. Although we know very little about Mary, what we do glean from the Scriptures inspires Catholics, and many other Christians, from a very early age. Her humility and faith, her acceptance of potential scandal when told by an angel that she will bear the Son of God, her concern and protectiveness towards the Child (including her disappointment when He disappears for a few hours at the age of 12 to preach in the Temple), and her patience and long-suffering during Christ's Passion and Crucifixion are models of Christian faith and behavior. Can one think of better examples in human history? As for intervening with God or Christ, can one imagine a stronger representative than the Virgin Mary for

those who feel too shy or humble, some days, to pray directly to their Creator? There is nothing very difficult to understand, and certainly nothing “superstitious,” about this.

Of course, there are ranges of views about Mary among Christians. Few Protestants may want her glorified, but most certainly honor her piety and obedience to God’s will and regards her as more than just “Nazarene housewife.”⁴² At the other extreme, some Catholics believe that Mary’s role has been deliberately downplayed since the Second Vatican Council and that efforts to suppress devotion to her have been as ruthless as China’s Cultural Revolution.⁴³ It is normal that there should be such a diversity of beliefs and devotions. No one should feel threatened or offended either way.

This is not to deny that too much religious imagery can be distracting. I certainly prefer to pray in the plain but uplifting setting of an English Gothic cathedral than surrounded by the dripping baroque of the Spanish equivalent. This is a matter of personal taste and habit rather than a challenge to anyone else’s faith or traditions. It should certainly not be a matter of division among Christians. And I have never heard Catholics objecting to the simplicity or austerity of Protestant places of worship.

Now, I must return to the subject of papal authority -- which is linked to the issue of papal infallibility but is also much broader. Ironically, Paul VI found an infallible way of weakening papal authority by issuing his deeply destructive encyclical on birth control in 1968. The damage of that document was all the greater because the Pope’s two-year commission of clergymen and laity that studied the issue had recommended loosening Church rules on the matter. Pope Paul decided to ignore them. The Church in turn decided to ignore him. In fact, it had been doing so for a while. For example, several years before, the bishops of the Canadian province of Quebec had given Catholic women dispensation to use birth control pills, on the reasonable assumption that this would be formally permitted when the Vatican’s position was brought up to date. Once this opening occurred, no one -- not even the Vicar of Christ on earth -- could close the door. Yet millions of Catholics now slammed it, going in the opposite direction. Church attendance actually increased after the Second Vatican Council; it began declining in 1968, the year of the encyclical.⁴⁴ And Church teaching on this matter has been simply ignored. In 2002, only 14 percent of Catholics believed birth control to be wrong.⁴⁵

Nor do many Catholics believe any longer in papal infallibility. Catholics respect, and even yearn for, papal authority -- as they would from their own immediate fathers, up to a point. But the extent of that authority is a stumbling block for many, both within and beyond the Catholic Church. Mature adults honor their parents but do not let them meddle in their daily lives. The last quarter century has seen a great deal of interference in people's lives by the Vatican and a marked reversal of the values expressed in the Second Vatican Council. Among them are the notions that the Church is not the hierarchy but the "people of God" and that the structures which serve the Church should be "collegial" rather than centralized. These ideas now seem distant memories. Yet it is here that Protestant and Orthodox Christians, not just Roman Catholics, are looking for signs of an opening which will allow them to feel truly at home in a universal Church.

Interestingly, few non-Catholics seek to abolish the papacy as a condition of Christian unity. It is not the primacy of the Bishop of Rome that is disputed, so much as the way in which it is exercised. The Second Vatican Council referred to the Pope as "first among equals" -- a formula with which other Patriarchs (in Alexandria, Jerusalem and Moscow) might also be comfortable, if the Vatican behaved accordingly. What concerns them, and also most Catholics who are old enough to remember Vatican II, is that the Church has become more centralized rather than more collegial, that Rome regularly overrules decisions made by national episcopal conferences (particularly those of US bishops), and that the remnants of consultation which exist are purely formal at best. Other confessions seeking closer union with the Church see how Rome treats its members and wonder whether they would really be better off drawing closer.

Fortunately, there are practical ways of changing this -- for the sake of Roman Catholics and all Christians.⁴⁶ There are no doctrinal hurdles to overcome, just the accretions of past practice, especially since the late 16th century. Some of these reforms would actually be truer to the traditions of the early Church, and would have the added benefit of bringing us closer to our Protestant sister churches which restored them at the Reformation. These changes might shock prelates in Rome but will seem quite sensible to most educated Catholics. Such different reactions are almost normal in the light of the gulf that exists between what one popular writer has termed the Church's "hierarchy" and "the lower clergy and laity."⁴⁷ But, when it comes to reducing the powers of Rome, the changes *should* bite. As the former Archbishop of San Francisco, John Quinn, has pointed out, the effects of

reform must be felt if they are to be successful. “Unity will exact a price. It will not be won by cosmetic changes.”⁴⁸ The Church will have to make structural, pastoral, and canonical adjustments. “Collegiality, participation of the laity, decentralization, and greater openness to diversity are some obvious areas.”⁴⁹

The first thing the Church could do is involve people more in the running of the institution. This would mean treating them like adults rather than over-aged catechism students. Some parishes are run with the full involvement of the community. There are regular and wide-open elections for the parish council, and frequent reports back to members on issues the parish is facing. But such practices are not widespread and almost fly in the face of the bad example of many senior Church leaders over the last 30 years.

Even bishops are not consulted satisfactorily. Their meetings in Rome (called synods) have rather strange procedures. They open with lengthy plenary sessions, during which each bishop speaks for eight minutes, in the order they signed up. As a result, most speeches have nothing to do with each other. In the words of Archbishop Quinn, “Often the speeches have been prepared before the speaker left his country for Rome... As these speeches continue for two weeks in five languages, with simultaneous translation, there is no debate or intervention. The assembly listens passively.”⁵⁰ One can understand why. After two weeks, the bishops break up into small groups and prepare recommendations to the whole body and then the Pope for his use in preparing a document for the whole Church on the topic of the synod. “The Pope is free to use these propositions as he sees fit. There is no opportunity for open debate about these recommendations in the full assembly of the synod. Usually the Pope prepares and publishes a document on the theme of the synod a year or so after its ending.”⁵¹ Some bishops have complained that their own propositions were not represented at all in the final list. Even Richard John Neuhaus, the editor of the religious journal First Things, whose patience and sense of humor are as broad as his learning, has found the process tedious. At the 1997 Synod of the Americas, Neuhaus joked that the endless speeches and drafts amounted to “cruel and unusual punishment.” “The reworking of reworkings is a major part of the synod process. Much as with the cud of a cow, things are brought up again and again for rechewing... [And] this cow has seven stomachs.”⁵²

This is how “collegiality” works at the highest level of the institution. If I were a bishop, I would be disappointed; if I were a Protestant, I would be horrified. Lay people, not just ordained ministers, should be involved in every aspect of the institutional Church. Without the “people of God” at their side, priests, bishops, and cardinals will be remote from the daily lives of those they are trying to serve. Ideally, the laity and local clergy should even be involved in the choice of new bishops. Rome could still confirm them, but the list of candidates would be drawn up at the level of each diocese and vetted by each country’s bishops’ conference. This was how church leaders were chosen in the first millennium. It was also the model for the way Popes -- or the Bishops of Rome -- are chosen. Members of the College of Cardinals are granted “titular” churches in the Eternal City to recreate the tradition that local pastors choose their bishop. At the moment, even national episcopal conferences are not always aware of the recommendations made to the Pope by the papal representative in their country. Your Holiness, I know that you are aware of the precedents for such changes, but if other readers of this letter are aghast at the idea of greater consultation within the Church, I refer them to the Acts of the Apostles, which glisten with the simple values that guided the early Christians.

Such turning of the governance of the Church on its head -- in a “Protestant” but also early-Christian fashion -- would go a long way towards putting the role of the hierarchy into perspective. It would chain the dragon’s feet rather than lop off its head, but lead inevitably to other reforms. Like a modern corporation, whose procedures and processes adapt naturally to a flatter structure, the Church could no longer be involved in every aspect of local events. At the moment, an alcoholic priest who wishes to abstain from drinking the small amount of wine used in the Eucharist and replace it with a milder form of fermented grape juice, must apply for an exception from Rome rather than his bishop.⁵³ Priests who wish to leave the ministry must also wait for a decision from Rome. Such anomalies would disappear if local churches became more important.

Change would also have to occur at the top. The Pope’s secretariat, the Roman Curia, would need to be shaken up. It must shed the sense of omniscience and taste for centralization which dates back to a time when popes were warriors and monarchs, with significant territorial possessions. It must see the need for a lighter structure and a lighter touch. Instead of having life-long appointments, most staff would be replaced after serving

fixed terms just long enough to be efficient. An effort to draw on a broad range of nationalities and backgrounds would also be fundamental.

This is a large agenda, but it would raise the spirits of many Catholics, reassure other Christians who yearn for a closer but still diverse union with the Roman Church, and strengthen papal authority by focusing it on things that matter.

There may be other differences between Catholics and other Christians which I have overlooked, but I doubt they will stand up to close analysis. Why should it matter that such differences are exaggerated and hence become obstacles to better understanding among Christians? Because part of the purpose of the Church, and certainly the ambition of the Apostles following the original Pentecost, was to be all-embracing. Those who take Christ's instruction to heart -- to go out and teach all nations -- must certainly ask themselves how they can do this credibly without first setting their own house in order? How can people of other cultures or beliefs respect a faith that almost boasts of its own internal differences, instead of drawing its adherents together? Pope John Paul II put it simply in his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* [That They May Be One]: "When non-believers meet missionaries who do not agree among themselves, even though they all appeal to Christ, will they be in a position to receive the true message? Will they not think that the Gospel is a cause of division, despite the fact that it is presented as the fundamental law of love?"⁵⁴ By this token, the more evangelical one is, the more committed one should be to healing the wounds of history and reaching out to fellow Christians.

Another reason for achieving greater Christian union is simply human. The more universal the Church becomes, the greater the reinforcement every Christian will receive in avoiding evil and pursuing a good life. I have felt the strength of that solidarity in my own experience. For professional reasons, I have traveled widely in the world and hence seen fellow Christians in very different environments. I have worshipped with country people on Tanzania's Mount Kilimanjaro; attended Easter Vigil in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic, feeling close to everyone around me even though I was one of the foreigners in the enormous crowd; and admired (every Sunday for three years in the early 1990s) the devotion of parishioners in Abidjan, the capital of the Ivory Coast, whose eyes were fixed on the altar despite the heat and city noise pouring in through the open windows. I have been to an evening Mass in central Java so well attended

(even though there had been Masses on the hour throughout the day), that there was an overflow crowd outside watching the service on television monitors. I have slipped into a Protestant chapel in the weekday bustle of Hong Kong, connecting not just with God and myself but also with the otherwise foreign culture around me. In Beijing, I was thrown back to the rituals of my childhood at a Mass celebrated by a priest facing the altar rather than the congregation. In Sydney, Australia, the Anglican Cathedral was as inspiring, in its quiet way, as St. Peter's in Rome. I have seen more distracted people in air-conditioned churches in North America than in poor tropical countries where many worshippers wondered where their family's next meal would come from; yet their thoughts seemed fixed on God. In a universal church, the potential for inspiration and solidarity is immense, and it would become almost infinite if we expanded the boundaries of the institution as far as we could without of course watering down the discipline of being a Christian.

A greater union would also re-channel the wasted energies of past divisions. In a journey through rural France in 1879, Robert Louis Stevenson noticed a plaque at a country church that boasted of raising funds for the propagation of the Catholic faith in foreign countries. Some of that money, Stevenson reckoned, had been spent for "the darkened souls in Edinburgh," while small Scottish parishes complained about the ignorance of Rome. "Thus," he wrote, "to the high entertainment of the angels, do we pelt each other with evangelists, like schoolboys bickering in the snow."⁵⁵ Later, he spent two nights at a Catholic monastery where the monks greeted him warmly but two other guests, a local priest and a retired military man, were less hospitable. When they learned he was Protestant, they tried to talk him out of his depravity. "I assure you," the priest said, "I have no other feeling but an interest in your soul." "There ended my conversion," Stevenson wrote. Honest man! He was no dangerous deceiver; but a country parson, full of zeal and faith."⁵⁶

Like the priest in the story, some well-meaning people still justify mutual antagonism as if they were living in the distant past, when fairly fine theological distinctions could sow confusion, and the Church had to set a very firm course. Then, in the words of the English poet Coleridge, blind believers sometimes "inscribed the cross of Christ on banners dripping with human gore."⁵⁷ Nowadays, modern Christians can reasonably wonder what all the fuss was about. Few of those ancient "heresies" seem very threatening now. Pelagians believed that human effort rather than divine grace was key

to salvation. Arians had trouble believing that Christ was *equally* God and man. Iconoclasts were opposed to worshipping pictures. Manicheans thought the world a contest between Good and Evil. Jansenists believed that human beings were too sinful to deserve the Eucharist. Many people *died* because of these doubts. In Chesterton's words, "A sentence phrased wrong about the nature of symbolism would have broken all the best statues in Europe."⁵⁸ In fact, the Western Church's insistence on adding a single word ("Filioque") to the Nicene Creed -- suggesting that the Holy Spirit had proceeded from the Father "and the Son" -- led to the rupture with the Eastern Church in 1054.

These differences no longer lead to sectarian murders and civil wars. But religious divisions still cause damage to Christian morale and example. Fortunately, among Christians, the importance of humility has never been disputed and may yet win out. In the words of C.S. Lewis: "Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses. If he is your Christian neighbor he is holy in almost the same way, for in him also Christ -- the glorifier and the glorified, Glory Himself, is truly hidden."⁵⁹

Holy Father, your predecessor believed that promoting Christian unity was "a specific duty of the Bishop of Rome."⁶⁰ He added that "legitimate diversity is in no way opposed to the Church's unity, but rather enhances her splendor and contributes greatly to the fulfillment of her mission."⁶¹ As you work to find richer solutions in this area, the hopes and support of the entire people of God will be with you -- and all the more, if you involve, engage, and inform them in your efforts.

Married Priests

I realize, Your Holiness, that I have been addressing you in a very familiar tone. Even Martin Luther -- two years after nailing his 95 theses on the church door at Wittenberg and on his way to being pronounced a heretic by Rome -- began a letter to Pope Leo X as follows: "Most holy father, necessity once more compels me, refuse of society and dust of the earth that I am, to address your exalted majesty; and I implore your holiness to listen to the bleatings of the poor lamb that now approaches you."⁶²

If I write to you more directly, it is because I am older than Luther was at the time, more influenced by traditions of democracy and plain

speech, and almost as impatient with the Church on the next subject of this letter -- clerical celibacy -- as Martin was with the sale of indulgences to build St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

Sometimes publicly, but more often privately, Catholic theologians have questioned the Church rule that priests should not marry. Some have looked at the one or two sentences in the Gospel that refer to the subject, comparing the Greek and the Aramaic (Christ's own language) to decipher what Jesus intended, and pointed out that celibacy was seen as a gift from God rather than a law that everyone should follow.⁶³

Christ never said to His followers -- even the closest ones -- that they should be celibate. St. Peter was married and St. Paul was not. Priests were married in the Catholic Church as late as the 12th century. They can still marry in the Orthodox Church and certain eastern rites of the Roman church in countries like Hungary, the Czech Republic, the Ukraine, and Lebanon. In fact, one of every five Catholic priests is married. Like Western priests, they are subject to your jurisdiction and enjoy your blessing.⁶⁴

No amount of latter-day rationalization can alter the fact that, relatively late in its history, the Church changed its internal rules for earthly reasons, rather than to comply with Christ's teachings. Yet, the celibacy rule has deeply damaged the institution. Confidence in the Church and its teachings has leached away as steadily as its priests have retired or grown old, with little fresh blood in their ranks to renew and challenge them. This unfortunate rule has also led to abuses that have filled the front pages of newspapers in North America and Western Europe. The refusal of the Church to recognize the crisis facing it, let alone confront it, has been a source of deep pain, anxiety, and confusion for lay and ordained alike -- not just in wealthy countries but also in large parts of Africa and Latin America. If the issue surfaces less in the media in poor countries, it is possibly because those cultures have a relatively effective safety valve. Many priests have mistresses and children, cared for by the community, as such conduct responds to local notions of what it means to be "healthy" and makes them more credible as a voice in the community. Westerners may be scandalized by such "hypocrisy", but they may need to grow accustomed to it, as Catholic priests from developing countries become more prominent in North American and European parishes.

I do not want to make light of celibacy itself. People as diverse as the American Shakers, Buddhist monks, and Mahatma Gandhi have considered sexual self-denial among the highest of human virtues, or regarded it as an essential gateway to proper contemplation and self-fulfillment. Christ, who asked His followers to do many difficult things, recognized that celibacy was a very demanding ideal, like fidelity in marriage: “Not everyone can accept this (celibacy), but only those to whom it has been given. For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept it (celibacy) should accept it.”⁶⁵ Surely, celibacy is admirable when it is chosen freely and wholeheartedly rather than accepted gamely by those eager to serve others and who think that, in the process, they will also be able to deny themselves an important part of their being. Many seminarians may think themselves “eunuchs” early in life only to discover new desires and a yearning for human attachments once they are ordained.

Certainly, celibacy serves a larger purpose. In the words of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the man you declined to embrace the day of your installation as Pope, “Whatever the cost, this vocation [celibacy] stands as an essential part of the background to understanding the body’s grace; paradoxical as it sounds, the celibate calling has, as one aspect of its role in the Christian community, the nourishing and enlarging of Christian sexuality.”⁶⁶ But, almost in the same breath, the Archbishop adds: “True celibates are rare -- not in the sense of superior but in the sense that watchmakers are rare.”⁶⁷

People *choose* to be priests, you might answer. No one is forced to enter the seminary, and many young men around the world appear to accept celibacy as an indispensable part of their calling. But many more priests have left the Church -- as many as 80,000 between 1964 and 1992⁶⁸ -- than have joined it. Many potential candidates for the priesthood in Europe and North America have other career options. Without wanting to denigrate the quality of priestly vocations in Africa, Asia and Latin America, one must ask how many of their candidates for holy orders come from long-established middle-class families, where access to higher education and well-paid jobs is relatively assured. As these economies become more affluent, the “crisis” of vocations in the West may become a worldwide problem as well. In some developing countries, the problem already exists. In Brazil, only 15 percent of people are able to receive communion on Sunday, while more than three

million Catholics attend services led by lay people.⁶⁹ Of course, studying for the priesthood is not the same as preparing to be a lawyer or doctor or engineer. Catholics speak of “vocations” rather than job choices. But it is easier to become a priest than to enter other professions in developing countries. And, like military service, past acceptance of celibacy in Western countries may also have been partly the product of a narrower range of career possibilities.

What have been the arguments in favor of celibacy in the Church? Let us set aside the ancient, and now deplorable, idea that any sexual activity -- even as an expression of love or instrument of procreation -- renders a person “impure.” While not cited formally as a reason for celibacy in recent centuries, there is no denying that an ambiguous attitude to sex in the early Church (holy when necessary, but even holier in abstinence) affected attitudes to marriage among the Christian clergy.

The most substantive argument for forbidding marriage has been that Catholic priests should be able to devote complete attention to their parishes and congregations. An “undivided heart,” it has been argued, is essential to serving the community fully.⁷⁰ In practice, celibacy has led to heavy or distracted hearts among priests struggling with the obligation. It has also sparked skepticism among lay people that priests have the life experience necessary to understand their problems or stresses, particularly family ones. Other Christian ministers, such as Anglican priests, will admit that family obligations can occasionally distract them from their work, but that does not mean that most of them want to become bachelors again. Many would argue, too, that a loving rather than “undivided” heart is a strength in their ministry and that serving a spouse, a family, and a congregation all at once is a special blessing. Ironically, the depletion of priestly ranks -- caused by the difficulty of remaining celibate -- has added to the workloads of individual priests. The restructuring of parishes in some countries, particularly in rural areas, has caused priests to scramble from one Sunday Mass to another, reducing the time they have to listen and minister to individuals, and has put a premium on administrative obligations over spreading the Gospel. Some observers even associate uninspiring sermons with the limited time priests have to attend to their duties.⁷¹

Another, less obvious, reason for the celibacy rule was to ensure the full loyalty of ordained ministers to the Church itself. By the late Middle Ages, many priests were concerned to acquire and pass on material

possessions to their wives and children. These obligations could be time-consuming and lead to abuses of priestly offices. Priests from noble or well-to-do families had particular distractions in this respect. As a result, monastic communities -- whose members were sworn to chastity, poverty, and obedience -- were the main nurseries for future church leaders, including bishops. Celibate priests could be counted upon to share whatever inherited wealth they had with the Church itself, and to be more subject to the internal disciplines of the institution. No control could be more absolute than the Church's repression of the sexual lives of its priests.

Whatever the reasons underlying it, clerical celibacy has seriously damaged the Western church over the last fifty years. The first and possibly most profound consequence has been the rising average age of priests. Between 1965 and 2002, the average age of diocesan priests rose in the United States from 46 to almost 60. While half were under 45 in 1965, only 20 percent were that young in 2002.⁷² An aging clergy has affected the image and energy level of many parishes, reduced the number of role models and hence the appeal of priestly vocations for younger Christians, and hampered last-ditch efforts to stem the hemorrhaging in the numbers of regular churchgoers. In a once-dynamic Montreal church I visited in 2002, the 80 year old celebrant spent the whole of the Mass, including the Consecration, leaning on a high stool at the altar; his sermon was listless and difficult to hear; and there were only ten people attending the 11:00 Mass on a Sunday morning. Not only are Western priests increasingly old; many have also been desiccated by the company of other lonely men in soulless presbyteries. As a result, they do not exude the natural joyfulness that one expects from true believers in God and spreaders of the Good News. This is particularly true in Western Europe, and dramatically so in Italy and France, where in addition to loneliness priests suffer from limited financial support and count on few material comforts. (Many readers will smile at this statement and think of wonderful priests in their own community who triumph over age and isolation; but few readers will think that happy priests are the rule rather than the exception.)

Celibacy has also led to a rising population of gay priests within the Catholic Church. Internal estimates put the number as high as 50 percent, but the figure may reach 80 percent in some places. This is not a perverse result. It is a natural outcome of the conflicting considerations that any young man -- and for that matter, any young woman -- would face. Very few people can imagine depriving themselves of close human company for the

whole of their lives, giving up the possibility of having children, and observing from a distance the love and fellowship of the rest of the human race. Among the few who can picture such a life are young homosexuals who think that the pleasures of marriage are closed to them, have yet to recognize or accept their sexual orientation, or have managed to persuade themselves that they can do without sex. Undoubtedly, many gay priests are able to repress their carnal desires. But many also find themselves, when it is too late, like beached whales, caught in a state where they can no longer breathe. Most Catholics -- if they do not know it already -- will probably be disappointed to learn that a great number of priests are gay. They are right to be concerned. The priesthood should represent the whole of the human family: young, middle-aged, and old; straight, gay and indifferent; men and also women (but here I am anticipating the next topic).

A third consequence of a celibate priesthood has been the scandal caused by the sexual abuse of children, as former victims (some of whom remained silent for two or three decades) have found the courage or opportunity to speak out. Church leaders have rightly insisted that the number of pedophile priests has been very small *in relative terms*; but in absolute numbers, their acts have shocked and continue to distress the Christian community as a whole. Except superficially, there is no connection between such abuses and the large number of gay priests. Pedophilia is no preserve of one sexual orientation. Young girls have also been abused by priests. A more likely cause is the inevitable pressures on a large group of people of the same sex, denied access to normal physical pleasures, to vent their desires where they can, like heterosexual men in prison. In the 60s, 70s, and 80s, before girls and women were given prominent roles in church services, adolescent boys were simply the most obvious target. The consequences have been a public outrage so large that it came close to damaging John Paul II's otherwise impregnable reputation in the United States. The financial damage has also rocked the foundations of many dioceses in the United States and Canada. Since 1950, the US Catholic Church has spent more than \$1 billion on settlements, legal fees, counseling, and other expenses. The bill will continue to grow; in fact, more than a third of total spending so far (\$378 million) has come in just the past three years.⁷³

How can the Church overcome these three serious problems -- an ageing clerical population, the large number of gay priests, and persistent sexual abuse of minors by Church personnel? The answer is not to ban gay priests. This would worsen the crisis of the priesthood, reduce vocations

even further, and chase serious young people away from the seminary, while also creating a different kind of scandal. Why would one ban Catholics from the priesthood on the basis of sexual *orientation*? How would one test for it? And why would young, red-blooded, heterosexual men be presumed a safer bet to withstand the rigors of clerical celibacy? The idea is almost too absurd and self-defeating to be believed. But, unfortunately, in late 2005, the US bishops sent investigative teams to the country's 229 Catholic seminaries to do some house cleaning and, in November 2005, the Vatican issued an Instruction on how to deal with gay seminarians. Although the document was shorter, clearer and, in some respects, kinder than previous drafts which had been circulating for eight years, the conclusion was stark: No gay men should be admitted to the seminary, or even allowed to teach there.⁷⁴

Gay priests reacted to the news with a mixture of sadness and foreboding. Some went public with their views. Calling themselves the Church's "unloved and unwanted children," 80 Italian priests posted an anonymous letter on the Internet in December 2005 to say that their sexual orientation had not stopped them from being good priests. "We don't have more problems living chastely than heterosexuals." They even considered their sexuality a strength because it allowed them to "share the marginalization and suffering of many people."⁷⁵ One does not need to be gay or liberal to see the nonsense in the Vatican Instruction. In October 2005, writing in the British conservative weekly, *The Spectator*, the editor-in-chief of the *Catholic Herald* ridiculed the idea of a ban on gay priests: "If enforced, it will deprive a struggling church of the ministry of future priests, bishops, cardinals, popes and saints, while leaving untouched the predatory womanizers of the developing world. Genuine pedophiles, meanwhile, will regard it as just another obstacle to be tiptoed round on their way to Johnny's bedroom."⁷⁶

Some commentators, including men who have left the priesthood for this reason, suggest that it may be better to face the truth about one's sexual identity and suffer the consequences. I accept this reasoning, but only up to a point. While openness and truthfulness are always to be preferred, how are gay priests any different from many married laymen who struggle with homosexual "tendencies," believing them wrong, but prefer to keep the subject in their hearts rather than cause genuine distress to their wives and children? If such men believe that keeping the matter quiet is best for their own emotional health and that of others, their judgment should be respected -- even if some psychologists and ethicists would argue that they are living a

lie. Similarly, priests who have decided that their vocation is more important than openness about their sexual identity, should be given the room to reconcile the two in their minds, if they can. In the logic of celibacy, priests are “married” to their parishes. They need to conduct and express themselves in ways that will not cause harm to their “family” members.

Banning, or harassing, gay priests may solve a false problem and worsen a real one: the small number of priestly vocations in Western countries. It is time to look out beyond the foxhole the Church has dug for itself, put up a white flag, and consider surrendering to common sense. The intense publicity of the pedophilia controversy and the Church’s strict measures to discourage new incidents will probably suffice to solve the problem, for now. But, until the Church takes the next logical step, most priests in the Western world will remain old and gay and open to unnecessary temptations. The only certain solution is to allow priests to marry, and to ordain people who are already married. Those who wish to remain celibate can do so, but the number of candidates for the priesthood would almost certainly increase sharply if seminarians were not forced to choose between a life of service and one of marital love and procreation.

Ordaining married men “of proven character” (*virī probati*) -- an option which has been discussed within the Church’s hierarchy in recent years -- would be a half-measure, vaguely insulting to married Christians of unproven character, and unfair to those priests already ordained who would enjoy an opportunity to marry.

You might argue, Holy Father, that this is an artificial issue. It is better to have a small number of truly dedicated priests than a host of well-rounded but occasionally distracted pastors. Celibacy, you could insist, is only a problem for those who believe in “self-fulfillment,” which in turn is a Western fad, a product of the new psychology, and scarcely better than self-indulgence. You might say that enough priests are being trained in developing countries to fill the gaps opening up in Western parishes.

But the modern world will not go away. Developing countries will face the same challenge of priestly vocations as incomes rise, education expands, and “modern psychology” spreads. In the meantime, the Western church will not accept more than a smattering of Filipino, Indian, Mexican, and Nigerian priests in its pulpits. Christ’s teaching and the Church itself are universal; but interpreting the Christian faith in fresh terms is a challenge

specific to individual cultures. Nationalism, parochialism, and racism should stop at the church door, but in practice human beings are most comfortable with people of similar backgrounds. To be truly Christian, we need to be challenged by other viewpoints and cultures; but even the most cosmopolitan believer would stop short of accepting that the Church should be so universal as to look strange to its members. Sympathetic critics have already pointed out that many foreign priests lack the training or cultural sensitivity necessary to spread the faith in North America or Western Europe.⁷⁷ Importing priests is not the answer to the shortage of clergy; opening the door to marriage is.

When the rules were last changed in the 12th century, the process was quite ugly. Pope Gregory VII actually called on the laity to boycott married clergy and priests' wives were hunted down, as if they were witches. The Second Lateran Council of 1139 invalidated priestly marriages, making all priests' wives concubines and their children essentially the church's property. The clergy fought back, unsuccessfully, although many priests continued to marry right up to the time of the Reformation, even in Rome.⁷⁸ This time around, changing the celibacy rule can be done easily and serenely

Holy Father, I do not want to dwell on this point. You and the rest of the Church's hierarchy know better than anyone the arguments for and against a married priesthood. What you do not seem to appreciate is the extent of dissatisfaction among Western clergy and laity alike at the Church's inertia, and why millions of people like me are impatient for a sign of openness or flexibility on this point. Some of us were encouraged by John Paul II's acceptance into Catholic orders of a large number of married Anglican priests, who left their own communion to protest against the proposed ordination of women. (I disagree with their reason for leaving, but applaud the Catholic Church's common sense in welcoming them into the fold.) But why should ministers from other confessions be given special treatment? How can the Church reconcile the diversity of practice within its own institution, including the Eastern Uniate churches, which allow its priests to marry? And how can the Roman church argue that its priests are more effective, unmarried, than other Christian ministers, who outnumber them in some countries? For example, in the United States, Evangelical pastors often combine family obligations with an extraordinary degree of organizational and spiritual energy -- large enough to expand their congregations steadily and keep them anchored in strong faith and community service. What do they know, or do, that we do not?

Of course, it is not clerical celibacy on its own that has led to a sharp decline in the number of churchgoers, to the shutdown of many Catholic churches, and to an average age of many congregations rivaling that of their priests. In Western countries, current generations simply have less faith in organized religion than their parents did. The Catholic Church is plainly failing to adapt and to reach out to young people who are just searching rather than skeptical, who are impatient with magic formulas or blind faith, and who are eager to make a difference in the world and connect with other people of good will. A younger, more diverse, and married clergy would change the face of the Catholic Church and speak more forcefully and joyfully to new generations. It is unlikely that the change would have a radical effect on the total number of priests in a short period of time, but it would certainly enlarge the pool from which current candidates are drawn and lead to a gradual improvement in the quality, not just number, of spiritual leaders in the institution.

In the words of one theologian, written 15 years ago, “Without a new pattern of priestly ministry uniting the married with the celibate, the future for the church can only be an immensely depressing one.”⁷⁹

Ordaining Women

All the arguments I have used to support a married clergy apply just as strongly to the ordination of women. We may lose some of those Anglican priests who joined the Catholic Church in horror at the idea, but that would be a small price to pay for revitalizing the Church on a scale that few of us can dare imagine. The Christian world cannot cut itself off from the march of history.

What does history have to do with this, you may ask? A great deal, when you consider the large number of women who have inspired us from the very beginning of the Christian story, starting with the Virgin Mary herself, continuing with the many women to whom Christ confided some of His greatest truths (Mary Magdalene, Martha and her sister Mary, the Samaritan woman at the well), the Roman martyrs (Agnes, Cecilia, Lucy, and Rita), the Emperor Constantine’s mother Helen, St. Augustine’s mother Monica, Clare of Assisi, Joan of Arc, Catherine of Siena, Theresa of Avila, Theresa of Lisieux, and the strong pioneering women of North America (Kateri Tekawita, Elizabeth Seton, Mary of the Incarnation, Marguerite

Bourgeoys, and Marguerite d'Youville). To our knowledge, none of these women aspired to holy orders -- although Theresa of Lisieux certainly believed that women should be allowed to be priests. None of them sought female suffrage either, as it was beyond the realm of what they considered possible. But why should women of the 21st century accept anything less?

Throughout my life, I have met women who were spiritual giants. How ironic and cruel that they should be denied positions of leadership in the Church. I knew one woman at St. Augustine's parish in Washington DC who was at the crossroads of every important initiative in that community. In addition to raising a large family, Barbara Sherrod served on the parish council, participated in fund-raising drives, led parishioners in demonstrations down on the National Mall in support of great causes of social justice, headed Sunday morning catechism classes, organized spiritual retreats for adult members, and yet still found the time to accompany the Gospel Choir to concerts they gave around the city, as music lover and cheerleader. She even inspired the choir director Leon Roberts to compose perhaps his greatest contribution to contemporary African American Catholic music: a moving, almost ethereal Magnificat. She was a person of immense faith and energy, standing firmly on two great rocks: her black roots as a woman and her devotion to the Roman Catholic Church. Often, as I heard her make announcements or do the readings from the pulpit, I wished that she could preach to us and share some of that personal strength and faith through her interpretations of Scripture.

I think, too, of a French woman named Line De Courssou, whom I met in January 1992 at the small convent of Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity in Abidjan, the capital of the Ivory Coast. (I had just arrived for a three-year assignment with the World Bank, and I had gone there to greet the nuns on behalf of their sister community in Washington, DC.) Line was leaning over a work table, in a gleaming white dress (she always dressed like an angel), pouring over architectural drawings for a new convent, dispensary, and AIDS hospice which she had raised funds for on the Sisters' behalf. She had a certain advantage in that department, as she was the wife of the French Consul General. She was also the daughter of an architect and, while she had no professional training in that area, she immersed herself in the details and made numerous changes to the design. The Sisters were worried that the center would be too large and "grand," but Line insisted that it should be as modern and complete as possible. One of the only

concessions she made was to install latrines rather than individual toilets (with the nuns arguing that the latter would be just too wasteful of water).

A few weeks later, we attended the laying of the first stone of the AIDS hospice. When we arrived, we found Line in a white linen dress and broad-rimmed straw hat, sweeping the street in front of the site, surrounded by a crowd of curious children and adults. She had come earlier in the day and paid local children to do this, but they hadn't delivered on their part of the bargain. It was a scene out of Charles Dickens or Evelyn Waugh, but another reminder of her indefatigable energy. We couldn't keep up with her.

Helping the Sisters was not her only mission. She made a life-long campaign of arranging adoptions in the countries where she and her husband had served. When we met her, I believe she already had 900 under her belt. She and her husband had also adopted children themselves. She arranged for medical treatment for children with special needs, and she never accepted 'no' for an answer. Once, as a way of expediting decision-making at the Ministry of Health, where she was seeking a free operation for a child born with a horribly disfigured mouth and jaw, she carried the girl from office to office in her arms to dramatize the case. Horrified civil servants signed papers within seconds rather than stare at the poor child. She died of cancer in February 2006.

In the early 1990s, another woman was on my mind as I drove after dark in Yopougon (the largest suburb of Abidjan) through neighborhoods lit by small fires or electric bulbs and stirring with people who were talking earnestly, drinking beer, minding their children, cooking supper, working at sewing machines, and selling their produce. I stared out the car-window in a semi-daze, on my way to a funeral Mass for a Catholic nun who had died of AIDS at her motherhouse in Belgium. She had been infected by a blood transfusion in Abidjan nine years before, but had worked virtually to the end, first with prison inmates and then with a charitable organization to inform people about the disease. Sister Catherine was one of my closest friends. I had seen her off to the plane in July 1993, arm-in-arm, when her community decided that it was time for her to "come home." She knew that she was *leaving* home, and it was hard for her to do that. But she was weary, and she smiled weakly as I hugged her and said that it was now time for her to look after herself. I would never forget her. Nor would the crowd of people in this distant church -- including the Bishop, who broke down and cried during the eulogy.

People like Barbara, Line, and Catherine deserve better of the Church. None of them every talked of a sense of inferiority as Catholics; they were too busy and determined to care about their status within the institution, at least publicly. But I worried about the limited roles people like them could play in the Church, and -- strangest of all -- about their exclusion from the priesthood.

The issue was kept in abeyance for a long time by the large number of women in religious orders who were available for Christian teaching and administration; but as the number of nuns has declined as a proportion of the Catholic population, intermediate solutions are no longer obvious. It is true that many Christian confessions -- including the whole of the Eastern Church, some Anglicans, and some Protestants -- still oppose the ordination of women.⁸⁰ Yet, as with clerical celibacy, there is no New Testament Scriptural basis for excluding women from the Church's ministries. So why is the Church so stubborn about this?

Perhaps if Catholic priests were allowed to marry, and if bishops and cardinals were more comfortable in the company of women, there would be less of a taboo about the subject. I would not accuse Church leaders of being sexist or misogynous, although many undoubtedly are; they certainly suffer from a blind spot that is difficult to understand. The fact that many Catholic clergymen are gay does not explain it. Gay men are often quite comfortable with women; indeed, many feel more at ease with women than with heterosexual men. Perhaps an old-fashioned clubbishness -- the same archaic instincts that kept golf courses and other private establishments closed to Jews, blacks and women for the longest time -- has played a part. The fact that, in the entire history of the Church, there have never been women priests (in contrast to married ones, which existed for many hundreds of years) has also made it unthinkable. But, most of all, the subject was simply off the Catholic agenda. Those who were prepared to discuss the possibility were told to desist; some were even deprived of the right to teach Catholic theology. This repression of debate is almost as shocking as the exclusion of women itself.

As a man, I find this blind resistance to the ordination of women offensive enough. If I were a woman, it would shake my very faith in the Church. How could I aspire to head a major corporation or become the president of my country but never be able to lead a small parish? What are

the Christian values that inspire this prohibition? Surely not the fact that Christ chose men as his closest disciples two millennia ago. Christ Himself ignored the inferior status which society assigned to women at the time -- and still does in most parts of the Middle East. Jesus spent a great deal of time with women, despite their inferior roles, as he did with tax collectors, prostitutes, and Samaritans. Is this not a better hint of His values, and how they should be applied in the present day, than his apparent acceptance of the social norms of his time that only men should be in positions of leadership, or in the Jewish tradition, rabbis and teachers?

The exclusion of women from holy orders is so irrational and arbitrary that it is difficult to know where to start in refuting traditional arguments. I accept that modernization by itself is not a reason for change, although the Vatican has certainly not refrained from adopting better plumbing, central heating, air conditioning, contemporary media (television, radio, and the Internet), bullet-proof Pope mobiles, and public relations “spin doctors,” which would have shocked some of your predecessors. Why are such aspects of contemporary life acceptable to traditionalists, but not the much more important modern trend of greater opportunity and recognition for half the human race? Your former press secretary Joaquin Navarro-Valls has talked openly of “competition with Islam” as a reason for some of John Paul II’s trips to Africa. How can the Church compete for converts from other faiths when it is reluctant to accept the equality of women within its own walls? And what do we know about Christ’s teachings and intentions that Lutherans and Anglicans -- who allow the ordination of women -- do not?

Not only is the prohibition difficult to defend; it seems thoroughly un-Christian. How can it be reconciled with total respect for the other person? How is it consistent with the Golden Rule? And why is it even more controversial -- or apparently threatening to hard-liners -- than clerical celibacy? In a remarkable letter to their bishops in January 2006, the heads of 230 religious communities in Canada called for more open discussion of controversial issues (such as separated families, same-sex marriage, and assisted suicide), suggested that clerical celibacy should be optional, and appealed for greater involvement of lay people in decision-making. But the document only suggested “exploring” the ordination of women.⁸¹ This delicate phrasing is a carryover of the lack of freedom of speech within the Church about important issues. But, in my view, there is nothing more sensitive or complicated about calling for women priests than for advocating married ones.

Earlier in this Letter, I appealed to the Church's institutional self-interest. On this issue, I invoke only its spiritual values.

Divorced Catholics

Greater openness to other Christian faiths, a married clergy, and the ordination of women would flood the Church with fresh energy, tranquility, and purpose. But a large number of Catholics would still feel on the perimeter of the Church, not excommunicated in the full sense of the word, but denied, in many cases, the comfort of the Eucharist.

Let me use two examples. My sister, who lives in Australia, lost her husband to cancer fifteen years ago and lived alone for ten years. Then, she met a man on the Internet in a Christian chat room connecting those who had lost loved ones to cancer (the man's wife had also died of the disease). My sister visited him in Melbourne for a month, he came to Montreal for a visit, and they decided to live together. They have done so ever since, quite happily. Unfortunately, they entered into a civil union rather than religious marriage. As a result, my sister has been told by her parish priest that she is living in sin and cannot receive communion. Obviously, she was pained by the news and begun worshipping with a group of Baptist neighbors instead. Where is her fault? What is the meaning of the sacrament of marriage for two widowed people too old to have children? And why should communion be used as a punishment against a faithful daughter of the church?

Another woman I know, now 70, married at an early age and was divorced within two years. She could probably have had the marriage annulled; but she had left the Church and preferred to use the archaic procedures available in the Province of Quebec at the time. Quebec granted divorces only on very narrow grounds, such as adultery; so, her lawyers had to produce artificial evidence of her sinfulness. That would be a wrenching experience for anyone. Then, she lived with a man for twenty years without marrying him (neither of them wanted children and he had an aversion to institutional constraints of any kind). Finally, she met another man and married him, and they have been together for over twenty years. Ten years ago, she returned to the Catholic Church, sings in her parish choir, and goes to Mass almost every day. But she is constantly pained by references to the Church's position on divorce and takes communion only because her confessor told her to follow her conscience in the matter, and she believes --

as I do -- that going to Mass without receiving the Eucharist is like going to a wedding feast and not partaking in the meal.

Fortunately, many Catholic priests are understanding on the matter, and perhaps even more fortunately Catholics are not obliged to wear yellow stars or pink triangles as they approach the communion rail. But my friend -- and many like her -- would feel more fully at home in the Church if Catholic teaching were less absolute on the matter of divorce. How would my friend gain full admission to the sacrament under existing rules? Must she abandon her current husband and try to re-marry her husband of fifty years ago -- if she can find him and he is still available?

I do not want to make light of a complex problem. Divorce is a serious matter, and unlike the other issues on which we can only speculate about Christ's intentions and views, Our Lord was quite explicit on this subject: "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."⁸² There is no better illustration of the self-centeredness of modern Western society than our high divorce rates. No one who changes partners like towels, or imitates the example of some film stars, can claim to treat the institution seriously. Christian marriage is the fruit of prayer and reflection, rather than lust, convenience, or whim. It emphasizes obligations to the other person rather than civil protections under the law. It is a reed which bends rather than breaks with challenges, a test of the self-discipline, restraint, humility, and generosity which Christ expected of His followers. Part of the satisfaction of marriage is to face and overcome adversity.

But living together can be hard. Samuel Johnson sometimes exaggerated to make his points, but there was usually truth in his wit: "It is so far from being natural for a man and woman to live in a state of marriage that we find all the motives which they have for remaining in that connection, and the restraints which civilized society imposes to prevent separation, are hardly sufficient to keep them together."⁸³ Even Christ allowed divorce in the case of infidelity -- which was probably as widespread then as it is now. And the Church's own broad grounds for the annulment of marriages confirm the growing need for understanding

Attitudes have changed slowly on this subject. Even in the supposedly freewheeling United States, voters elected a Catholic president for the first time (JFK in 1960) two decades before they put a divorced man in the White

House (Ronald Reagan in 1980). John Paul II, whose worldview was essentially set in the 1950s, refused to give gifts or decorations to guests at the Vatican he knew were divorced.⁸⁴ In this respect, he was probably being more severe than Christ. In the process, Catholics who have already suffered pain, separation and disruption at home have felt exiled at church, where they would normally expect reflection, healing, and repose.

They have numbered in the millions for a long time now. Already, 40 years ago, some commentators suggested that the only practical remedy for this “catastrophe” was for the Church to accept divorce and for Catholics living in “invalid unions” to come forward and organize themselves in each diocese so as to impress upon the hierarchy and clergy the size of the problem.⁸⁵ Instead, most have probably left the Church, while others lurk in the shadows, hoping for change and eventual forgiveness and acceptance.

Behind the scenes, there has been growing flexibility in the Church’s position. The Church has always been willing to “annul” marriages which were wrongfully contracted, because of specific reasons, such as a close blood relationship between the two parties, impotency, or apparent insincerity about having children, reflected in the failure to consummate the marriage. In doing so, Church lawyers insist that the Church is declaring such unions null and void from the start rather than actually dissolving them. To quote an ecclesiastical lawyer of the 1950s: “The whole world might have thought it was a proper marriage, but yet in point of fact it never was. It was nothing more than an illicit association even though both persons were in entire good faith over it.”⁸⁶ Yet, even before Church law was modified in 1983 to broaden the grounds for annulments, there was the thin edge of a large wedge in Church texts. If at least one party to a marriage did not fully and consciously intend to respect their vows -- to have children, to be entirely faithful to each other, and to marry no one else for the rest of their lives -- the vows were judged invalid from the start.⁸⁷ As a result, by the mid-1990s, the number of Catholic annulments in the United States had risen to 60,000 per year, and the approval rate was over 96 percent.⁸⁸ By now, the grounds for annulment are so broad that one can safely ask how many marriages could not be declared invalid for one reason or another.⁸⁹

Proving those reasons can be difficult, and Church procedures are deliberately laborious and time-consuming -- so as to discourage frivolous cases and supposedly establish beyond a doubt that a marriage was never valid. These procedures favor those who are educated or relatively well off

because the parties understand their rights, are confident enough to argue their case, and can afford to pay for the procedure. Significantly, 82 percent of Catholic annulments occur in North America.⁹⁰ For those who are in similar difficulty but do not have the means and fortitude to re-examine their wedding vows, it can be disturbing to see other marriages declared null and void so easily.⁹¹ By itself, the judicial nature of the Church's response to failed marriages is painful. The fact that people are undergoing a deep crisis in their lives is often overlooked. In the words of one theologian, "Canon law seems to presuppose that divorce is the consequence of evil and pride, but experience shows that believing Catholics do not decide quickly or easily to remarry."⁹² But the Roman Church's procedures now offer more grounds for resentment and even scandal than clarity and comfort, and the biggest mystery to anyone who looks dispassionately at this subject is why the Roman Catholic Church is so much harder on this subject than other Christian confessions.

The most startling alternative approach is that of the Orthodox Church. From very early in their history, Orthodox theologians have recognized that the Scriptural ideal of an unbroken marriage cannot always be attained and that the Church must act mercifully towards those who have attempted such a marriage and failed. In the words of St. Cyril of Alexandria (5th century): "It is not a writ of divorce that dissolves marriage before God, but bad actions."⁹³ For the same reason, and to promote the possibility of stable relationships in the future, the Orthodox Church also condones re-marriage, up to three marriages altogether. The Orthodox Church also allows its priests, though not its bishops, to marry. Is it possible that this has something to do with that Church's more understanding attitude to marital difficulties?

This is not to suggest that Orthodox Christians treat marriage lightly; indeed, for the "orthodox" to do so would be a contradiction in terms. Marriage remains a holy sacrament. An Orthodox Christian who marries outside the Church may not receive Holy Communion and cannot act as a sponsor at another person's wedding or as a godparent at a baptism. A second or third marriage ceremony is more subdued and "penitential" than the first, and is only possible if a person has received an ecclesiastical, in addition to a civil, divorce.⁹⁴

Why can't the Roman Church behave the same? Again, I am not arguing for a "large tent" Church which condones excess, overlooks

deliberate selfishness or hardheartedness, and encourages two people to treat solemn commitments lightly. But I *am* appealing for an institution that is open-eyed and forgiving and willing to embrace all its members, in the twists and turns of their individual lives, rather than condemn them to life in prison without parole. Even repentant murderers can receive Communion, so why should remarried Catholics be treated worse? The official position is that divorced people are in a state of continuing sin, but that answer reflects the very rigidity I am complaining about. Why should the Roman Church be more unbending -- and less forgiving and loving -- than our Orthodox brethren, let alone our Protestant ones? Until now, the only advice the Church has offered to divorced Catholics who remarry is to try living as brother and sister rather than engaging in sexual relations. This leads one to wonder whether canon lawyers are as lightheaded as they are hardhearted.

I do not expect the Church to change its basic teaching on this matter, that marriage is serious and must be entered into as if forever. But I believe the institution can be more compassionate in explaining and applying that teaching. Part of that humanity would be to accept publicly -- not just in the privacy of Catholic annulment procedures -- that circumstances can sometimes overpower the best will in the world. The Church can also avoid speaking of divorced Catholics in tones of heinous wrongdoing. They should be encouraged to receive the Eucharist if their informed consciences allow them to. Many priests already encourage this. The institution should back up those clergy and avoid censorious statements that do more harm than good.

Why can't the Church's position be similar to the wise statement quoted in Philip Yancey's *What's So Amazing About Grace*: "I cannot approve of [my friend's] course of action, because divorce is always disobedience of God. I would be betraying my belief if I were to hide it from him. I know that there is always a solution other than divorce to a marital conflict, if we are really prepared to seek it under God's guidance. But I know that this disobedience is no worse than the slander, the lie, the gesture of pride of which I am guilty every day. The circumstances of our life are different, but the reality of our hearts is the same. If I were in his place, would I act any differently from him? I have no idea. At least I know that I should need friends who loved me unreservedly just as I am, with all my weaknesses, and who would trust me without judging me. If he gets his divorce, he will no doubt meet even greater difficulties than those he is in today. He will need my affection all the more, and this is the assurance I must give him."⁹⁵

Adequate foundations for changing the Church's treatment of divorced Christians lie in the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom, which suggested that all people, not just Christians, "should act on their own judgment, enjoying and making use of a responsible freedom, not driven by coercion but motivated by a sense of duty."⁹⁶ Few Christians divorce each other lightly. Even fewer believe they can avoid remarrying, or believe that, if they do so, they can live together like brother and sister rather than man and wife. The whole Church -- not just the local clergy -- needs to recognize this and apply the full teachings of the Gospel to the way it behaves towards these millions of troubled believers.

Conclusion

Holy Father, as I said at the start, I have tried to write this Letter in a spirit of Christian humility and deep love of the Church. In fact, I feel so loyal to the institution that if an outsider attacked it strongly (even for some of the reasons I have discussed above), I would probably defend the Church's failings as less important than its many strengths. But the best criticism is informed from within. A 19th century Frenchman once admitted to judging the Catholic Church like someone looking at a cathedral's windows from outside: "You cannot appreciate such things completely except by entering the building and examining the decorations which adorn the windows inside. Similarly for the Catholic Church, to judge it properly one has to see it from within."⁹⁷ Day in, day out, Catholics can appreciate both sides of the window.

As I close this letter, another architectural image comes to mind. One of my favorite corners of the Vatican is the Scala Regia, the handsome stairway to the extreme right as one enters the portico of St. Peter's Basilica. Designed by Bernini and completed in 1670, it is an artificial tour de force. Deliberate optical illusion makes the stairs seem wider and steeper than they really are. The draperies at the base are not marble, but painted stucco. And the equestrian figure on the wall at the foot of the staircase is the first "Christian" Emperor Constantine. His story is also less solid than it appears. Although he was "converted" to Christianity in 312, he refused baptism until he was dying in 337. In between, he committed acts of violence that must have shocked even his contemporaries, killing his wife, two sons, and a

brother-in-law. He had his wife boiled alive and strangled in her bath; one of the sons was flogged to death.⁹⁸

This convenient use of artistic materials and selective reading of history seem a reasonable analogy for the way important aspects of the Church are organized. Supposedly solid traditions are constructed on foundations that will only impress the uneducated or uninformed. Yet these practices are more than decoration. They affect the representativeness and inclusiveness of the entire Church. Further delay in modernizing the institution will harm millions more people -- those within the Church and those outside wanting to believe in an institution as bold and as gentle as Christ. The Church will survive. But it will first become a remnant, as it already has in France, Quebec, and Ireland, irrelevant to the daily lives of many people and a source of great irritation and suffering rather than consolation. Large numbers in North America, too, have drifted away, even though the number of nominal Catholics in the United States (25 percent) and Canada (50 percent) remains impressive. These numbers will shrink as young people refuse to be categorized by the faith of their parents. The Church will remain strong for a while in Africa and parts of Latin America, but there, too, a shortage of priests and a shrinking of congregations may also emerge. Parts of Latin America are already suffering from a shortage of priests and the number of practicing Catholics has shrunk sharply in some countries, like Chile.

I know that resolving problems of internal organization will not by itself make the Church more vital. That can only be achieved by millions of individual Christians doing the right thing in their own parishes, communities, and lives. Mainline Protestant denominations that have ordained married men and women and accepted contraception and divorce have continued to lose members. At the same time, evangelical Protestantism has flourished despite emphasizing their differences with other confessions and demanding a great deal from its followers.⁹⁹ But in changing what can be changed, and proceeding with love and consideration for those who are confused and disappointed by Catholic stubbornness in some areas, the Church will lift its sights to more important challenges -- such as spreading the Gospel, promoting social justice, and nurturing greater respect for God's creation -- while building reserves of inner strength to confront those needs more forcefully. Among more important reforms I can imagine is to turn the Vatican into a museum most of the year and find some other way to communicate Christ's example than to preside over a relic city-

state. Perhaps it might be better for you to live six months of the year in a poor country like Mali or Laos and return to Rome only for major feasts or meetings. Heads of state could always visit you in your temporary residence.

Such thinking may be too grand. Some purists, I know, would prefer to think small and believe it is necessary for the Church to sink further before it emerges renewed. They would prefer a more tight-knit community of believers for a time, stable in their faith and unbending in their practices. Those who hold that view are attracted by the purgative force of a forest fire and look forward to the green shoots which will rise from the ashes. But I believe most Christians hope for a gentler solution, preferring the stately old trees that have bent to the winds and frosts of time, standing tall and firm, gnarled rather than ramrod, ready to face future storms or sunshine, rather than fire. Even the most impatient Catholic wants the Church to emerge larger and stronger, rather than weakened, from its current crisis.

Of course, fear of change will continue to complicate reform. That fear is as human as the hope many Catholics have that change will benefit everyone. Even priests who suffer directly from the shortage of clergy can be attracted to retreating rather than moving forward. In July 2006, I visited a good friend in rural France who looks after five parishes. He has always been a traditionalist, and his clinging to old forms -- alongside his shining joy as a servant of Christ and the community -- has filled his churches each Sunday. He had even been saying Mass for two years with his back to the congregation (a throwback to pre-1965 practices) and had taken advantage of recent renovation work in his main church to do away with the open modern altar facing the main part of the church. Although I respected his values and success as a priest, I expressed dismay at this. I could understand why he insisted on wearing a cassock everywhere he went, I told him. I appreciated why he would sometimes want to say the Mass in Latin. But I could not understand why he would want to reverse one of the most intelligent changes the modern Church had made: to involve the congregation more completely in the most solemn celebration of the Catholic faith. A young seminarian who was also there answered for him, pointing out that most Western churches had been built to face east, towards Jerusalem, where the Resurrection had occurred; it was only right that the priest should also face in that direction. He cited your book *The Mystery of the Liturgy* to support this argument. I would have none of it. I certainly understood the symbolism of Jerusalem, just as Muslims face Mecca when they pray, but I saw this as less important than bringing the sacrifice of the

Mass closer to Catholics, as participants rather than mere spectators. It would be better to re-build all our churches, I argued, than do away with a modern reform which reflected the values of the early Christians.

A few months later, I recounted the conversation to a friend, a US bishop, who corrected the seminarian's reference to your book. More important, he said, was your argument that priests should not become the focal point of the Mass. It was important that strong, even charismatic, priests not encourage the development of a "cult of personality" at the expense of selfless service. But, in my view, few Catholics would see this as a real risk. Few priests are charismatic; even fewer seek to be. Far greater is the danger that theological arguments -- some well-meaning, others abstruse, and still others self-serving -- will drive more and more Catholics away from the Church into a non-institutional faith rooted perhaps in Scripture and personal searching but without the comfort, strength and challenge that come from praying and serving in a community. To head that off, we need a real debate about Church reform -- which essentially boils down to issues of internal organization -- that is respectful of traditional values and modern expectations, and aims to reconcile the best of the early Church with the best of contemporary possibilities.

The path to reform will not be easy; but nor should it be daunting. To begin with, you have the common sense and humanity of much of the laity and parish clergy to build upon. They are patiently dealing with a crisis that the hierarchy has refused to name or describe. And they are capable of wonderful leaps of adaptation, kindness -- and defiance. Under the headline "Parishioners take fight over gay official to bishop's office," a Canadian newspaper reported in January 2007 that members of Holy Cross Church in Victoria, British Columbia were protesting against the forced departure of a gay church administrator and the subsequent resignation of their priest. They were so incensed that they considered stopping their weekly donations to the church, while other parishes thought about following suit. According to the parishioners, "Father Mike refused to participate in the unjust termination of an employee of our parish who was the victim of unsubstantiated allegations made by individuals who refuse to be identified." The editor of a local Catholic newspaper explained that "conservative" Holy Cross parishioners had complained to the bishop about the employee, and he decided to resign rather than put his pastor in an awkward position. "It's the conflict of two churches," the editor said, "the institution versus the people." "People are ready for the long haul," said one parishioner who had a

master's degree in theology. "You can't go back to tell people it's pay, pray and obey. [The bishop] could turn this around if he had the humility and grace." "Poor little Father Mike," said another church member. "He was just the sweetest guy you'll ever meet."¹⁰⁰

At the same time, Holy Father, reformers in the Church recognize the size of the challenge you face. I sent an early draft of this letter to a Jesuit friend in California, who accepted all my arguments I made but hesitated in the face of the conclusions I drew. He was glad he was not you, in charge of this "institution at such a hard time in history...because frankly I would be paralyzed by my own doubts and fears about the complexity of it all." He was especially pained by the sight of the Anglican Communion unraveling in "such a horribly public way." "The lessons apply across the board, I think, and the Roman Catholic Church has to think about this very seriously... Those of us who advocate post-colonialist attitudes of democratic liberalism find ourselves in the very tough position of accepting that it is now the people of Nigeria who tell the Archbishop of Canterbury what the communion's position on the ordination of women and gays should be. And this puts the people of New Hampshire in a particular bind; on the one hand, they want to be liberal in the sense of acknowledging the Nigerians' right to believe and act as they want; on the other hand, they want to be liberal in the sense that they believe in a certain notion of human rights and human equality -- and so they believe that their agenda is, in fact (although they are not supposed to say it out loud), morally and religiously superior to that of the Nigerians. They have no intention of being checked on this. And the Archbishop of Canterbury is caught in this bind: A Western church with a handful of adherents who advocate a Western liberal agenda of gender rights as 'human rights'; on the other hand, an African church with the majority of Anglican adherents who see the Western agenda as typically decadent and immoral, a betrayal of the sources."

He also pointed to the broader crisis of the traditional Christian churches. "In addition to the recent news from Canterbury are recent statistics about Protestantism -- which are grim. In short, the great mainline Protestant churches are basically defunct. Not only are there almost no young people practicing Protestantism anymore; there is also a shortage of seminarians -- *despite the more inclusive policies of those churches regarding women, a married clergy, and divorced and remarried Christians.* It seems clear to me that the Catholic 'decline' -- which is relative, actually, since in the USA, once again last year, the Roman Catholic Church grew in

numbers -- is not about these particular causes. In fact, it may well be that these concerns cause decline among a certain age group and socio-economic-ethnic class, i.e., whites over 50. But they are not the concerns for other age-groups or populations -- including the Hispanics (the main source of growth in the US) and certain Asians (Filipinos and Vietnamese).”

“If I were Pope,” he concluded, “would I now change these institutional structures, knowing that they would probably alienate these Catholics still practicing and, at the same time, do nothing to stop the disaffection of the under-50 crowd which is even more pronounced among the Protestant denominations that already embrace these? I don’t know. I would be torn between a desire (as I see it in the Archbishop of Canterbury) to try and do what I saw as the right thing while, at the same time, trying to avoid the disintegration of the communion. Happily, I am not pope. I’m just a history teacher.”

This is an eloquent case for prudence. Yet, it seems to me that no amount of understanding of the difficulties confronting the institution, or of the obstacles that stand in the way of change, removes the moral obligation we have of making the Church a reflection in every way of the values Christ preached and lived. Of course, we should worry about the confusion that major changes may cause to some Roman Catholics -- it would be un-Christian not to do so. But what about the confusion and hurt which already exist among thousands of men and women who would like to enter the priesthood but cannot conceive of giving up the joys of married life, or the millions of Catholics who regret their decision to marry or divorce but cannot re-write their pasts, or the large number of gay men and women who want to lead a Christian life without denying an important part of who they are?

What would Christ have said about this? We do know that he was in the habit of upsetting some apple carts. Not for the sake of shocking anyone, but to keep challenging his followers to conduct their lives in a new light. He kept the company of people whom others in his society looked down upon: women, Samaritans, prostitutes, tax collectors, lepers. Not because they were sinners needing his attention; after all, not even the Pharisees and high priests were free of sin. But perhaps, instead, because their heavy hearts offered more fertile soil for his teaching. Who needs clothing and food and company in our day? Not just the literally poor, and the physically sick, but also those who believe in Christ but have been made

to feel excluded and unwanted in the Church. I believe that they are the Church's current calling.

Holy Father, I imagine that you will agree with at least parts of this Letter and hope that it will contribute to a debate that will lead to a renewed and more all-embracing Church. Whatever you will be able to do for that renewal, and however long you serve as the successor of Peter, I pray that Christ will bless your Pontificate.

Your faithful son,

Robert

Notes

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- ² Lecture by John Allen at McGill University, Montreal, March 2, 2006.
- ³ Quoted in *The Catholic Times* (Montreal), November 2005, Vol. 30, No. 3, page 4.
- ⁴ *The Gazette*, Montreal, February 28, 2006, page A12.
- ⁵ Hans Küng, "Benedict XVI: A Year Later," April 20, 2006, in *Village Weekly* (Ireland).
- ⁶ *The New York Times*, May 2, 2006, p. A1.
- ⁷ Lecture of the Holy Father, "Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections," University of Regensburg, Tuesday, September 12, 2006, www.Vatican.va, page 2.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- ⁹ Canwest News Service, November 27, 2006.
- ¹⁰ John R. Quinn, *The Reform of the Papacy: The Costly Call to Christian Unity*, Crossroad: New York, 1999, pp. 61-62.
- ¹¹ David Denby, *American Sucker* (2004), page 70.
- ¹² Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human*, Anansi Press, 1998, Toronto, p. 126.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, pp 25-26.
- ¹⁴ His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, *God is Love [Deus Caritas Est]*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, DC, 2006, p. 9.
- ¹⁵ Jimmy Carter, *Our Endangered Values: America's Moral Crisis*. New York: Simon & Schuster, page 69.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ Letter to *Le Devoir*, Montreal, March 1, 2006, from Jacques Léger (Morin Heights).
- ¹⁸ Peter Steinfels, *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003, p. 271.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 273.
- ²⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Memory and Identity: Personal Reflections*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005, p.13.
- ²¹ Robert Calderisi et al., eds., *Faith in Development*, World Bank, Washington, DC, 2001, p. vii.
- ²² Ralph L. Curry, *Stephen Leacock: Humorist and Humanist*, Doubleday & Company, New York, 1959, p. 19.
- ²³ *Deus Caritas Est*, p.43.
- ²⁴ William Hazlitt, *On the Pleasure of Hating* (1826).
- ²⁵ Samuel Butler, *The Way of All Flesh* (1902), page 113.
- ²⁶ Quinn, p. 66.
- ²⁷ Article by Henri Tincq, in *Le Monde*, translated and reprinted in the *Guardian Weekly*, April 28-May 4, 2006, p. 17.
- ²⁸ William Bassett and Peter Huizing, eds., *The Future of Christian Marriage*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1973, p. 7.
- ²⁹ Steinfels, pp. 29-30.
- ³⁰ CNN, November 30, 2006 (reporting on the Pope's trip to Turkey).
- ³¹ Hans Kung, *The Catholic Church: A Short History*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 2001, p. 15.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- ³³ Julius Norton Norwich, *A History of Venice*,
- ³⁴ Francis Parkman,
- ³⁵ A.N. Lewis, *C.S. Lewis: A Biography*, Harper Perennial, London, 2005, p. 2.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- ³⁷ Scriptural quotations are from *The New International Version (NIV) Study Bible*, Zondervan Bible Publishers, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1985.
- ³⁸ William F. Buckley, Jr., *Nearer, My God: An Autobiography of Faith*, p. 281.
- ³⁹ Kung, pp. 13-14.
- ⁴⁰ Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myths: Conversations with Bill Moyers*, page .
- ⁴¹ Quinn, pp. 77-78.
- ⁴² Charlene Spretnak, *Missing Mary*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2005, p. 32.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.50.

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- ⁴⁴ Andrew M. Greeley, *The Making of the Pope 2005*, New York and Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2005, pp. 35-36.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- ⁴⁶ The next few paragraphs draw heavily on the views of Archbishop John Quinn and Father Andrew Greeley.
- ⁴⁷ Greeley, p.
- ⁴⁸ Quinn, p. 21.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 111-112.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp 112-113.
- ⁵² Richard John Neuhaus, *Appointment in Rome: The Church in America Awakening.*, Crossroad, New York, 1999, pp. 39, 29, 41..
- ⁵³ Greeley, p.
- ⁵⁴ Quoted in Quinn, p.15.
- ⁵⁵ Robert Louis Stevenson, *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes*, Folio Society, London, 1967, p.48.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 73.
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- ⁵⁸ Chesterton, p. 146.
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- ⁶⁰ Quoted in Quinn, p. 18.
- ⁶¹ From *Ut Unum Sint* (para. 50), quoted in Quinn, p. 24.
- ⁶² Jules Michelet, *The Life of Luther Written by Himself* (translated by William Hazlitt), , first published in 1846 and re-issued by George Bell and Sons, London, in 1904, p. 55.
- ⁶³ See Heinz-J. Vogels, *Celibacy -- Gift or Law: A Critical Investigation*, Burns & Oates, Tunbridge Wells, 1992, Chapter 1.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9
- ⁶⁵ Matthew 19: 11-12.
- ⁶⁶ Rowan D. Williams, "The Body's Grace," in Eugene F. Rogers, ed., *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002, p.318.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 317.
- ⁶⁸ Vogels, p. 105.
- ⁶⁹ Neuhaus, p. 105.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.
- ⁷¹ Letter "To Our Brother Bishops" from the Canadian Religious Conference, January 10, 2006, www.crc-Canada.org, , pp. 11, 15.
- ⁷² Steinfels, p.30
- ⁷³ Rachel Zoll, Associated Press, June 10, 2005.
- ⁷⁴ See *Letter in response to friends in the aftermath of the Vatican Instruction of November 29, 2005* at www.jamesalison.co.uk.
- ⁷⁵ "Gay Italian clergy speak out against Vatican ruling," CBC News, December 15, 2005.
- ⁷⁶ Damian Thompson, "Don't Bar Gays." (reprinted in the *Montreal Gazette*, October 6, 2005.)
- ⁷⁷ "To Our Brother Bishops," pp. 12,14.
- ⁷⁸ Kung, p.100.
- ⁷⁹ Adrian Hastings, in his Foreword to Vogels, *op. cit.*, p.8.
- ⁸⁰ John McManners, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1990, p. 383.
- ⁸¹ "To Our Brother Bishops," p.12.
- ⁸² Matthew 19: 9.
- ⁸³ Quoted (on March 31, 1772) in James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, Oxford University Press, 1983, p.473.
- ⁸⁴ Caroline Pigozzi, *Jean Paul II intime*, Robert Laffont, Paris, 2005, p. 89.
- ⁸⁵ Victor J. Pospishl, *Divorce and Remarriage: Towards a New Catholic Teaching*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1967, p. 90.
- ⁸⁶ Patrick J. O'Mahony, ed., *Catholics and Divorce*. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1959, p.91.
- ⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.96.
- ⁸⁸ Joan Bryden, "'Til Decree Do Us Part," *The Walrus*, Toronto, April 2005.

⁸⁹ Bassett and Huizing, p. 101.

⁹⁰ Bryden, op. cit.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 102.

⁹² Ibid., p. 82.

⁹³ Quoted by Fr. Ted Stylianopoulos, on Beliefnet.com.

⁹⁴ Rev. Stanley Harakas, *The Stand of the Orthodox Church on Controversial Issues*, p. 3
(www.goarch.org).

⁹⁵ Quoted in Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1997, p. 171.

⁹⁶ Quoted in Bassett and Huizing, pp. 102-103.

⁹⁷ Msgr. Charles Perraud, *A propos de la mort et des funeraillles de M. Ernest Renan*, H. Chapellieret Co.,
Pars, 1893, page 15.

⁹⁸ Tom Harpur, *The Pagan Christ: Recovering the Lost Light*, Thomas Allen, Toronto, 2004, pp. 41-42.

⁹⁹ Steinfelds, pp. 354-355.

¹⁰⁰ *The Globe and Mail*, Toronto, January 30, 2007.