

# **Islands & Bridges**

**Three Essays and an Interview  
on Independent Catholicism  
in the United States**

Rev. Libardo Rocha

with a foreword and English translation by  
Rev. Dr. Jayme Mathias

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## Table of Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Prologue   | i  |
| Meditations for a Gathering<br>of Independent Catholic Clergy in Austin, Texas | 1  |
| Did God Conceive of the Church?  | 15 |
| Catholic Terrorists  | 25 |
| An Interview with Father Libardo Rocha   | 43 |



## FOREWORD

Rev. Dr. Jayme Mathias

Here at Holy Family Catholic Church in Austin, Texas, we sometimes wonder what we did to deserve Father Libardo Rocha. People come in and out of our lives, and immense gratitude is the only appropriate response for the way in which some individuals so greatly bless us and enrich who we are.

Father Libardo came to Holy Family in 2015, after more than 20 years of ministry as a Catholic priest in Rome. As a young man in Colombia, he was well acquainted with the context of Latin American liberation theology. As a professor of dogmatic theology at a pontifical university in Rome, he shared his love for the history and doctrines of his church. Father Libardo draws from a deep spiritual and theological well, improving the lives of those whom he teaches and to whom he preaches. He is a gift to Holy Family; more importantly, he is a gift to Independent Catholicism!

Saint Paul wrote, “by the grace of God I am what I am” (1Cor. 15:10). There is no doubt that Father Libardo would similarly acknowledge the role of God’s grace in making him who he is today and in bringing him to his present ministry as a priest at Holy Family Catholic Church and in the beautifully diverse tradition of Independent Catholicism, where he continues to generously share of himself, his gifts, and his life in the pursuit of helping others to grow in their relationship with God and with one another. We thank God for the gift that Father Libardo is to us here at Holy Family, and, because we tend to lift our eyes from our parish community to the larger movements of which we’re part, we thank God for the gift he is to Independent Catholicism!

Father Libardo’s vocabulary embodies the best of *communio* ecclesiology, and he often speaks of the communion with which we should live as the people of God—and as the ministers who tend to the needs of God’s people. Father Libardo’s imagery of islands and bridges in this work reflects that. Imagine a world where the many “islands” of Independent Catholicism are connected through a system of “bridges”: That’s the vision he has for us! Imagine our role, like that of the *pontifex maximus* himself, as bridgebuilders: That’s Father Libardo’s vision for Independent Catholic clergy and laity!

Here at Holy Family, we’ve been infected not only by Father Libardo’s contagious enthusiasm and his love for the Church, but also by his *communio* ecclesiology. For the first six years of our existence, our parish community self-identified as part of one Independent Catholic

“jurisdiction” – one likely resembling so many other small, ragtag bands of U.S. Independent Catholic clergy. Then, to celebrate Father Libardo’s silver jubilee as a priest last May, we invited all our sisters and brothers in ministry to join us in celebrating him and his life of service, even offering to cover their travel expenses. You can imagine our disappointment at the lackluster response. While we were grateful for the presence of our bishop and of the jurisdiction’s sole woman priest – who possesses a heart the size of Texas – our own hearts were heavy when we realized that we had affiliated ourselves with clergy who had little seeming interest in being more than a loose-knit cluster of islands in the Independent Catholic sea.

Five months later, in October, we extended a similar invitation to communion. The same two responded, the same 13 or so didn’t, and our bishop alone joined us for a time of fraternity, communion, and continuing education. It was a liminal moment in our self-realization that we no longer desired to be an island in the Independent Catholic sea – and that we desired to be part of something larger than any given Independent Catholic jurisdiction. The dream of hosting an interjurisdictional, all-are-welcomed gathering of Independent Catholic clergy and laity flowed from those experiences.

As part of our gathering of clergy last October, Father Libardo shared a reflection on how the Israelites have not been forgotten because they recorded their history. He challenged us to write our own “scriptures,” our own Independent Catholic history and theology. This book is Father Libardo’s first attempt to do exactly that for and within the Independent Catholic tradition. He illuminates in the kindest, most pastoral way what I might characterize as the “island pathology” of Independent Catholicism: We call ourselves “independent” and we call ourselves “catholic,” then we somehow seek to separate ourselves from the universal, catholic ecclesial reality that is...the Church! “Independent Catholic” thus begins to seem an oxymoron in need of greater, corrective interdependence – in need of greater bridgebuilding!

In the present work, Father Libardo raises questions of our own self-identity as Independent Catholics, and he proposes paths toward greater communion through the hosting of interjurisdictional synods and the sharing of such dreams as the penning of an Independent Catholic *Lumen Gentium!*

So, enjoy this work, ruminate on Father Libardo’s words, and join us in making them part of your prayer and your praxis in service to God’s holy people within the marvelous gift to our world that is the Independent Catholic movement!

**MEDITATIONS FOR A GATHERING  
OF INDEPENDENT CATHOLIC CLERGY  
IN AUSTIN, TEXAS**

**OCTOBER 26, 2019**

**The Council of Trent: Birthed from Crisis**

Each time the Church encounters a time of great crisis, it finds recourse in an important instrument: the famous councils of the Church. I begin here with the Council of Trent because, though the Roman church recognizes 21 councils, Trent enjoys preeminence in the history, dogma and organization of the church. Before Trent, there were 18 councils. Trent was the nineteenth. Then came the First Vatican Council, and then the Second Vatican Council.

Why should we begin with Trent? What did Trent do? When the Council of Trent was convened in 1545, the Roman Catholic Church was facing a crisis with respect to its doctrine, sacraments, and scriptural canon. Most people are surprised to learn that it took 1,500 years to definitively establish the scriptural canon of the Roman Catholic Church, to definitively establish the seven sacraments, and to establish the theological and dogmatic reality of the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Thus, we have to begin with the Council of Trent, since Trent is for the Roman church what Freud is for modern psychology, or what Saint Augustine is for patristics, or what the Holy Grail is in all the stories that revolve around the death and resurrection of Christ. So, to perform a sociological analysis of the current situation of the Church, you must begin with Trent.

The Council of Trent was a reaction to the sociopolitical problem of that era, which forced Clement III, who was not oblivious to the whole situation, into a position of formulating a “Counter-Reformation”. Why did we need a “counter-reform”? What was in need of reform? Wasn’t the Church just fine, sitting pretty upon its throne? What was the problem?

The problem was the reform of an Augustinian priest who realized that it was necessary to open the doors and shake the dust from all the dirty rags inside the Church. Martin Luther was very intelligent, but he also enjoyed the fortune of being assisted by German princes when he published his 95 theses. He had the endorsement of the German Catholic church—and the Germans had always been considered “barbarians” by the Roman church. Those “barbarians” were now displaying an

intelligence that went far beyond what Rome imagined ever judging or condemning.

In the end, Martin Luther was condemned, but he tore the veil of the temple and destabilized the foundation of the Roman church. The end result was largely positive for the Roman Catholic Church, since it led to the establishment of the church's scriptural canon, the definition of seven sacraments, and a clearer and more precise theology for the sacrament of the Eucharist. It is undeniable that Trent was an obvious reaction against the "Lutherans." At the same time, the shaky foundations of the Church were stabilized. One of the most important "architects" of the Counter Reformation was the famous Saint Charles Borromeo, the archbishop of Milan, who helped organize the church's first seminaries. After Trent, bishops who had never resided in their dioceses, began to pastor their people. They established seminaries, to provide a more solid theological education for future priests. So, Trent had positive consequences for the Roman Catholic Church, which now more clearly configured itself into a hierarchy of dioceses that could be better managed.

### **The End of the Pope-King, and the Birth of the Idea of "Infallibility"**

After Trent, the Roman Catholic Church lived off the theological, human and often less-than-divine "rent" generated by the Council of Trent, and the Roman Church continued forward, comprised of human beings like us and sustained by the Holy Spirit. It would take another 300 years for the Church to find itself in grave crisis again, when Rome was captured in 1870, Italy was united, and the reign of the Pope-King Pius IX would come to an end.

The Roman Catholic Church benefits from centuries of wisdom, and the priests and bishops who advised Pius IX knew what was coming: The unification of Italy was necessary, and the pope's presence in Rome was an impediment to unification around a capital in that city. The Roman Catholic Church convened another council, the First Vatican Council, and it's interesting to note what resulted: the church's proclamation of the universal jurisdiction of the pope and of the dogma of his purported "infallibility." The results of the First Vatican Council were less positive than Trent, but again the council was the fruit of the crisis that the church was experiencing at that time. It would be impossible to unite Italy under the pope, and the breach of Rome's Porta Pia gate by the Italian *bersaglieri* broke the total monopoly of the pope over his "papal states." The

reactionary dogma of “infallibility” divided the Roman Catholic Church, just as the universal Church was divided in 1054, when the Roman Catholic Church separated from the Orthodox Church, which continues today.

It is important to consider the spiritual, sociological and anthropological realities that resulted in the famously separated or “independent” churches of that time. Yes, the separation was a result of the Roman Catholic Church’s proclamation of papal “infallibility,” but it would be a mistake to think that this was the only cause for the break. The Vatican Council dragged on, with its great desire for reform and anachronistic structure, and its stances were far from univocal. In fact, the council never officially concluded, such that when the Church found itself in crisis again and there was a call for a new council, the question arose: Should we conclude the First Vatican Council, or convene a Second Vatican Council? The decision of Angelo Roncalli, Pope John XXIII, was to open the windows of the Roman Catholic Church for a new council, the Second Vatican Council.

In the 2,000-year history of the Church, the Roman Catholic Church recognizes only 21 council – but I doubt the Roman Catholic Church can go another 300 without a council. Current events suggest with great probability that the Roman church will not even be able to wait 100 years to convene its next council.

Today, Pope Francis is displaying a penchant for convening synods, which, while less important than the councils of the Church, are important encounters. These gatherings have great relevance for today: the First Synod of the Family, the Second Synod of the Family, the Synod on Young People, and now the famous Pan-Amazon Synod, about which, with all respect, I have many doubts from a theological point of view: The *instrumentum laboris* for the encounter suggests that it will largely tackle pantheism in a non-binding way, from a dogmatic perspective. But I digress.

### **The Independent Catholic Church: Who Are We and Where Are We Going?**

If we are going to undertake an analysis of who we are as independent Catholic churches, or as the Independent Catholic Church, it is necessary to highlight one detail: The ecclesiology and ecclesiological vision for “independent Catholic churches” or the “Independent Catholic Church”

largely depend on the perspective that each theologian has of the reality that now begs clarity.

We must also note the difficult times in which we live, which, in some way, suggest that we are called to respond with ministerial collegiality and, even better, episcopal collegiality, since bishops are primarily responsible for safeguarding the deposit of faith, so that it might continue to serve not only as a foundation, but also as a beacon illuminating Catholicism, with all the movements and churches that exists within its ecumenical sisterhood and brotherhood.

We cannot explore the reality of who we are, why we are, and where we are going in a serious theological, sociological and anthropological way unless we begin with the context of the Council of Trent, which flowed into the context of the First Vatican Council, and then to the Second Vatican Council. In all this, the Church has been Peter's Barque—the boat of Saint Peter, to borrow the image found in the mosaic above the entrance to the Old Saint Peter's Basilica.

In which direction is the "boat" of the Church now heading? What are the "waves" and the "storms" that are striking the "boat" today, perhaps even building into a great tsunami or hurricane that might cause the Church to falter? Perhaps the greatest storm is the secularization of the world, a term with which many of us who are clergy are familiar. In simpler terms, secularization is the de-Christianization of our world. With media and technological advances, our secular world is more connected than ever; at the same time, loneliness is the disease of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We feel lonely. To borrow an image from Albert Camus, we are strangers walking in a dark night. Or, as the great Czech writer, Franz Kafka, said, we are living a metamorphosis. Within Saint Paul's vision of the mystical Body of Christ, which is the Church, this metamorphosis results in Christian children becoming non-Christian adults. They're moving further and further from the Source of our being, as the great Spanish mystic, Saint John of the Cross suggested. And we find ourselves in crisis.

The Church finds itself today in an increasing crisis, in need reform, in need of being called to another *mea culpa* moment of asking forgiveness. It needs to contemplate and live within the reality that surrounds it, while, at the same time, desiring to evolve and improve and open its doors to those who stand in the place of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:11-32). The prodigal children who were once at home with us have now squandered the inheritance they received in love, and now we find ourselves confronted with the question of whether we will play the role of the merciful parents who welcome them home. Discussions of the

Parable of the Prodigal Son often focus on the faults and the redemption of the child, with less attention on the goodness of the merciful parent who welcomes his/her child with open arms. In many ways, the Independent Catholic Church has much to offer in this respect to the prodigal children of this world. We have many arms to embrace humanity in the midst of the challenges it is experiencing and in its move away from its "home," often bedazzled and distracted by the things by the "glitter" of this world, until it finds itself in total darkness.

From the perspective of spirituality, our faith tells us that our salvation is in Christ. "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life" (Jn. 14:6). "I am the Alpha and the Omega" (Rev. 1:8). "No one comes to the Father, except through me" (Jn. 14:6). "My Father and I are one" (Jn. 10:30). "And the Word became flesh and dwelled among us" (Jn. 1:14).

It's as if the compass is broken, and we've lost our bearing. Where is the Independent Catholic Church in the U.S., or where are independent Catholic churches in the U.S.? Do we know our origins? Those who do not know their origins and history are at risk of living as strangers in the night. And we can't fall back on the pretext of the famous Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset: "I am I and my circumstances." Yes, we are who we are, and we are influenced by our circumstances, but let's not forget the Greek aphorism, "Know thyself." And if there is any small "grain of sand" that I might contribute to this encounter of Independent Catholic clergy and laity, I might challenge us to better know ourselves in the communion we have as Independent Catholics and as members of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, and that we might ask ourselves, "Where are we going?"

First, let's analyze who we are, and why we are.

Being is the most important element of the human person as subject. Who am I? Every time I ask that question, I discover who and what I am, I discover my qualities, and I see my relationship with others and with this world. Aristotle said, "The human person is, by nature, a social animal." We are social beings, and that brings us into relationship with one another—like the relationship we enjoy with one another in the Church, where we can share the deposit of faith that has been handed to us. And it's that deposit of faith that makes us a Church. So, where are the independent Catholic churches? And what is the reason for their silence? To borrow a phrase from Margherita Guarducci, the famous epigrapher who discovered the epigraph of the famous tomb of Saint Peter, it's as if independent Catholic churches share a "sepulchral silence" that doesn't serve them well. It's as if we're still in the catacombs, like the early Christians, who were often persecuted for their beliefs. It's

time for us to come out of the catacombs, just as the Church did, thanks to God and to the Emperor Constantine after the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. It's time for us to stand and proclaim who we are as Independent Catholics. It's time to let our voice be heard!

I'm intrigued by the relative silence of the Old Catholic and Independent Catholic traditions since the First Vatican Council in 1870— and by the fact that we haven't configured ourselves in the same way that our Lutheran and Anglican sisters and brothers have. We lack solid structures. Our history is actually quite similar to the schism of 1054 A.D., when the Orthodox Catholic Church separated itself from the Roman Church. Despite the separation, the two have continued on, and both have their present configurations. There is no reason why we, as relatively young as we are, don't configure our own ecclesial reality, with a strong theological foundation, so that we might better be a light in this world.

Nearly 300 years passed from the Council of Trent to the First Vatican Council, and nearly 150 years have passed since then. Where is the voice of the Independent Catholic Church? Where are the voices of independent Catholic churches? It is these churches that I would like to address from an ecclesiological perspective, with some analysis and words on the communion that we share.

### **Islands Disappear, and Still the Church Will Prevail**

If the Holy Spirit grants us the grace to gather in Austin on October 24-26, 2019, that encounter, even if small, will allow us to reflect on our voice and our ability to configure ourselves into a body. Why would we not take advantage of this? What are we afraid of? Are we afraid to leave our "catacombs"? Are we afraid to manifest our reality? Even worse, will we fall prey to the syndrome that afflicts many Independent Catholic bishops who prefer to live on their own "islands," rather than connect with others? I purposefully use that word, "syndrome", since syndromes, in the view of modern psychology, have pathological characteristics. An "island syndrome" could hardly be viewed as healthy for social beings. We know from geology that, with climatic change, islands are always at risk of disappearing.

"And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Mt. 16:18). If you believe in this theological principle as the foundation of our faith and

as a resource to support who you are as a bishop, you cannot choose to be an island. You cannot choose to live in isolation and risk that a tsunami will destroy you and wipe away the church you've built. It seems the growth of independent Catholic churches in the U.S. have largely stagnated. They are silent. And their silence and their tendency to hide in the shadows damage their ability to be a beacon in today's world, and to manifest the face of Christ, which is salvation, and to be an alternative for many in the Roman Catholic Church and in other churches.

We began this work with the Council of Trent, as a way of highlighting the crisis of the famous reform, when a courageous Augustinian priest broke with Rome's teaching on the indulgences that were being sold to construct Saint Peter's Basilica. But it was more than that. Martin Luther had intellectual abilities. He drew from a deep spiritual well. He was a person of faith, helped by circumstances, and he managed to inspire the people who would create the churches that we refer to in Spanish as our *hermanos separados*, our "separated sisters and brothers." Every crisis in the Church is resolved. Will we show ourselves as being similarly wise and capable of resolving the challenges before us?

### **The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States**

Today, the Roman Catholic Church in the U.S. is living through a time of crisis, which might inspire reflection for us in the Independent Catholic movement. After the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church in the U.S., with its many Catholic universities, was at the forefront of openness. This manifested itself in the formation of priests, and in many pastoral and liturgical realities. Then, what happened?

The clergy sexual abuse crisis in the U.S. Roman Catholic Church has caused its clergy to figuratively lock themselves in their sacristies for fear of being judged and condemned. The U.S. is now the only country in the world where a Roman Catholic cardinal has been removed from office, stripped of his faculties, and reduced to the lay state, as a result of his role in the clergy sexual abuse crisis. He is no longer a cardinal or bishop. He is no longer a priest. He cannot celebrate the Church's sacraments. And no one has said another word about him. Instead, they watch from their sacristies, where they are hiding in fear. They are afraid.

The Roman Catholic Church in the U.S. is also being influenced by the reigning pontiff, Pope Francis, whose personal pendulum is constantly swinging from left to right, to left, to right. The religious "right" in the

Roman Catholic Church manifested itself after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, where only with great hesitance were they willing to open the windows of the Church to the fresh air spoken of by Pope John XXIII. John's successor, Paul VI, attempted to confront this reality. Then, after the brief pontificate of John Paul I, came one of the longest pontificates in history, the pontificate of John Paul II. Though charismatic, he led one of the most closed pontificates, one of the most traditional and fundamentalist pontificates in the history of the modern Roman Catholic Church. John Paul II filled plazas with young people, but, as an Italian bishop famously noted, his churches were empty. This phenomenon continues in the U.S. Roman Catholic Church today.

Americans are great observers, and the Roman Catholic Church in the U.S. is watching. Despite the problems they've faced with complaints and corruption, intelligent and prudent American clerics know that they lead a wealthy and very organized church, one which is the envy of cardinals and bishops throughout the world. And they keep watching.

And whereas some had imagined that Pope Francis would help swing the pendulum to the "left," his intervention last November in the workings of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops made clear the opposite, when he found it "totally unacceptable" that bishops be held accountable for their role in the clergy sexual abuse crisis. And so the U.S. Roman Catholic Church continues to watch with what might be characterized as a sociological-religious attitude of observation. Meanwhile the pendulum of the U.S. Roman Catholic Church continues to swing to the "right." This may have catastrophic consequences for the U.S. Roman Catholic Church, which, in its return to the Council of Trent, finds itself defending a faith that doesn't need to be defended, so much as it needs to be lived. Fervent Catholics are an example of this defensive posture, with certain Roman Catholics setting themselves as critics, judges and executioners of their own sisters and brothers. Another manifestation of this is found in the reaction to the de-Christianization of our world, where clerics and seminarians feel it necessary to distinguish themselves from others by dressing in clerical garb. Those coming out of Roman Catholic seminaries in the U.S. today seem quite comfortable setting themselves over others, manifesting the reality of who they are in a way that might lead others to believe that the habit makes the monk.

In light of the right-leaning pendulum of the U.S. Roman Catholic Church, what will be the position of the Independent Catholic Church in the U.S.? In such a situation, those of us who self-identify as members of the Independent Catholic Church, or as independent Catholic churches, will be seen as a disturbing element to the traditionalist tilt. Our support

for married clergy puts us at odds with this tilt. Our openness to the ordination of women puts us at odds with the Roman church. Our willingness to view a person as much more than merely his/her sexuality puts us at odds, too. That's how we might be viewed by those in traditionalist churches, with their clerical collars and cassocks, their breviaries and rosaries—all of which are fine to an extent, since these are part of the spirituality that comprises a human/divine reality. But the questions arise: Where are we, and how will we, as members of the Independent Catholic Church, or of independent Catholic churches, respond to the challenges faced by society? If a church swings to the right, its members will swing to the right, and this might bring us to the point of rupture with a right-leaning church.

### **What Do Independent Catholic Bishops Propose?**

What do Independent Catholic bishops propose? How are they being a voice within the Independent Catholic Church? Where are they taking Independent Catholicism? Upon what theological foundation are they building, and what are the fundamentals in which, with which, and through which we might live as Independent Catholics and show that we are an alternative in a world that is continually changing? These questions are worthy of our time and reflection.

Based on the diversity of charisms that we find in Pauline theology, we come to see that the Church is a kaleidoscope, or, perhaps even better, a rainbow, with different shades of different colors that comprise a single rainbow. Like the rainbow, we manifest diversity in unity. Together, we configure a single body: Independent Catholicism. It is therefore a grave offense against the mystical Body of the Independent Catholic Church when independent Catholic churches do not recognize one other, or when they have such little visibility and voice that others do not see and hear them. For those who love theology, ecclesiology, and the history of the Church, it is no secret that all independent churches, starting with our Lutheran sisters and brothers, possess a creed, often modeled on the political Constantinopolitan creed of the famous Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. They also host synods. Lutherans, Anglicans and Episcopalians all have their synods, which bring together diverse persons who enrich their churches by filling them with the breath of the Spirit. In this way, each of those churches benefits from the diversity of gifts and charisms possessed by each. And, as a result of these synods, such churches forge their creeds, their liturgies, and the ways in which they respond to pastoral realities. Why, then, should we not talk about a possible

interjurisdictional synod of the Independent Catholic Church in the U.S., an encounter that might enrich us and give us voice? “I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness” (Jn. 1:23). From both a pastoral and an ecclesial perspective, such a “voice in the wilderness” would produce tremendous fruit, including greater efficacy in our work of mediating salvation, which is the search of all who belong to and/or minister in any church.

I plant this “seed,” knowing that a certain “death” will need to take place in order for us to enjoy greater life. “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds” (Jn. 12:24). Just as the seed must die, we, too, must die to our pride. We must die to our fears. We must die to our thirst for power and our desire to rule our own little “islands,” which often turn toxic and seemingly fail to generate the salvation we preach. This preaching is a specific feature of the Church’s mission and ministry. The Gospel of Saint Matthew makes this extremely clear in chapter 28: “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Mt. 28:19). Synods are important encounters for growing in and improving on those ancient elements of our Church which have manifested themselves with positive results since the beginning of our history of salvation and the beginning of the history of the Church, which was founded by Christ.

The Independent Catholic Church is not new, and still it lacks voice. It’s time for us to leave the “jungle” in which we’ve become lost. It’s time for us to become discontent with the “hut” in which we’ve found respite. As a church, we are called to something far greater than any hut. As Pauline theology suggests, we are called to be the mystical Body of Christ. As Johannine theology suggests, we are called to be light and love in this world.

If we choose to unreflectively remain on our own “islands,” our ears will grow increasingly deaf, our works will continue to bear relatively little fruit, and our voices and our communities will be lost to the hurricanes of time. It would be a shame for us to remain a church of the catacombs, risking the possibility of being buried there forever.

I’m hopeful that this gathering of Independent Catholic clergy and laity in Austin, Texas, even if small, will show itself to be extremely important for the Independent Catholic Church in the U.S., yielding fruits of communion and respect for diversity, and causing us to say with John XXIII and John Paul II, “What separates us as believers in Christ is much less than what unites us” (*Ut Unum Sint*, 20). United, we also become a great bulwark on Peter’s big boat. We, too, enjoy the opportunity of being part of this reality.

## The Call for a Future Synod

I invite us to prayerfully and very seriously reflect on the possibility of a future synod, where the seeds that are sown in this interjurisdictional gathering might be allowed to germinate and bear fruit for the theological reality of our Church—including the most important fruit of our salvation—and where we might more clearly see ourselves as the light and voice we are called to be. Joined together in the Trinity of God our Creator, Christ our Redeemer, and the light and fire of the life-giving Spirit, may we say together, “We are the Independent Catholic Church in the U.S.!”

We cannot live in this world without being aware of the times in which we are living, and we cannot be content to remain in our churches without looking out the window at our sister churches throughout the world. If we open our hearts and our doors, we can manifest unity, and, if the consecrated members of the Independent Catholic Church can do the same, we will manifest collegiality. It is only by looking out the windows of our churches that we’ll realize what is happening in the world outside our own, that we’ll realize who we are, what we were created for, and what our mission in life and in the Church might be.

In order to create a better future, we might do well to analyze the past and present. In Latin America, we enjoy a wealth of wisdom and experience that led to the creation of the famous CELAM, the Latin American Episcopal Conference, which first met in Medellín, Colombia. That encounter in Medellín manifested the fact that the Roman Catholic Church of Latin American had now become an “adult.” It was at that encounter that the Roman Catholic Church of Latin American discovered its voice. And the voice of CELAM continues to be proclaimed by all Roman Catholic bishops in Latin America.

The famous CELAM meeting of Latin American bishops in Puebla, Mexico also resulted in a very important document for the Latin American church. From the perspective of pastoral theology, that work alone is worthy of a doctoral dissertation. The meetings of CELAM in Santo Domingo, in the Dominican Republic, and in Aparecida, Brazil were also important organizing moments for the Latin American church, inspiring clergy and laity to create a better world through, what John Paul II famously referred to in Santo Domingo as, “the civilization of love.”

And so, I ask all bishops of the Independent Catholic Church in the U.S.: What are the psychological, emotional and affective factors that were part of your decision to become a bishop in the Independent Catholic Church, and what keeps you from looking out the window of

your own small—or perhaps not so small—community? Do you recognize the pathology, the disease of your own island-focused tendencies and the ways in which they impoverish the Church? With climatic changes, islands tend to disappear. No, we were not created to be islands.

### **Building Bridges**

Hence, we come to the beautiful figure of the bridge. The famous city of Venice in Italy is comprised of 118 small islands that are joined together by 400 bridges. So many islands are joined together to create a great city! 1,200 bridges unite the city of Amsterdam in the Netherlands. Bridges! The same is true in another beautiful city, Saint Petersburg in Russia. Bridges! If we are “islands,” each with our own qualities and characteristics that have enriched us, imagine what would happen if we built bridges to connect with other “islands.” Imagine if we came together to create a single body, to create what Saint Augustine referred to as the City of God. This country needs an alternative church, another City of God, a community that opens its doors to nourish and sanctify all our sisters and brothers.

I began this work with a history of the Council of Trent, which was convened to counteract the reforms of Martin Luther, which fractured the unity of the once-solid Roman Church. We continued our journey through the First Vatican Council, the Second Vatican Council, and the various synods that have been hosted by the Roman Catholic Church. All of these gatherings were “bridges” bringing people together, solidifying their communion, and allowing them to see one another as sisters and brothers. They brought together people who could say, “I respect you and your gifts, and you respect me and mine. Let’s find what unites us, so that, connected by bonds of fraternity, neither of us is an island. Let’s bridge together two or three or five islands. Let’s organically configure ourselves into a church!”

Bridges! That’s what those gatherings of the Episcopal Conference of Latin America were in Medellín and Puebla and Santo Domingo and Aparecida. It was those “bridges,” illuminated by the Holy Spirit, that made Latin American the “hope of the Church,” as John Paul II loved calling it.

Today, not only is the Church in crisis; the entire world is in crisis. Never before have we been able to communicate with so many people around the world, and never before has humanity experienced the

loneliness it experiences today. We are undergoing a metamorphosis that affects the social fabric of our world. As a Jewish rabbi once noted in the cathedral of Barranquilla in Colombia: "Society is sick, and the disease has metastasized in the social fabric of the Church and of our communities." The only remedy lies in bridges.

### ***A Lumen Gentium*** **of the Independent Catholic Church in the U.S.**

Pope Francis says that the Church is a kind of "field hospital." We do well to ask ourselves where we are in our own ministry as "field hospitals" within the Independent Catholic tradition. With all that is occurring around us, will we see Independent Catholic priests in some 10 or 20 years wearing cassocks in the streets and parks of our beautiful American cities? Will we fall prey to the same conservative tendencies and still find ourselves without a voice, perhaps even without a willingness to speak out? There's no value in being a silent church. It's far better for us to envision ourselves truly being a *lumen gentium*, a light to the nations!

I would like to share my dream of our working together to create a *Lumen Gentium* of the Independent Catholic Church in the U.S. Pedro Calderón de la Barca, a great Spanish writer, famously said "Life is a dream." Let's not be left simply dreaming, and let's not allow our dreams to become a nightmare. Instead, let us commit ourselves to realizing the dreams we have for the Body of Christ in the Independent Catholic Church, in independent Catholic churches, and in the Old Catholic Church.

We might begin with the question of what we should call ourselves. In the Hebrew anthropology, names are extremely important—so important, in fact, that the name of God was never pronounced, since it was "the name that is above every other name," as the famous hymn of Saint Paul says (Phil. 2:9).

So, let us be who we are, or at least try to give identity to who we are as the Independent Catholic Church in the U.S.

### **A Prayer**

I conclude with the prayer that comes to us from the theological treasure of Saint John: that we all might be one, “just as my Father and I are one” (Jn. 10:30). This beautiful prayer has tremendous theological weight, with its desire to seek unity despite the unique charisms of all. May we humbly recognize ourselves as the good, prayerful people we are, accepting one another, loving one another, and placing Christ at the center of our being, along with the Father and the Spirit, who model for us the community and unity of the Holy Trinity. Amen.

## DID GOD CONCEIVE OF THE CHURCH?

In my many years as a religious, I have attempted to reconcile myself with the thesis that God the Father created the universe and everything it contains, as we were taught in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (No. 279). Employing an anthropomorphism, though, I would like to ask God what God had in mind when God conceived of creation. Did God imagine the churches of our world? Indeed, did God conceive of the Church?

This question is hardly rhetorical, as it seeks to explore the history and definition of the Church. What is a “church”? Or, what is the Church? First, let us ask what representatives of various scientific disciplines have said about human spirituality, as these sciences have been beacons, illuminating our path and enlightening us, and bestowing great wealth on humanity.

In the hope of not making this treatise overly lengthy, I will limit myself to four of disciplines, with the hope that a synthesis of these four might shed light on the question at hand.

### Sociology

We begin with sociology and what it is that sociology might teach us about “church.” In the history of human spirituality, we find a desire, even among primitive people, to constitute forms of community and primitive forms of “church” – places where people can search together for the supernatural.

I won’t pretend to exhaust all that sociology has said on the matter, but I will appeal to a few sources, with the hope that together they might yield a more global vision for responding to our initial question.

Within sociology, I begin with French sociologist and philosopher Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), considered one of the fathers of sociology. As a representative of French rationalism, he suggested that religion is not merely “imaginary,” but is a social expression of a real and tangible phenomenon. He also noted that there is no society that does not possess religion. According to Durkheim, we perceive the existence of a force more powerful than our own individualities, a social dimension to which we attribute a supernatural face. Religion, in this view, is an expression of our collective consciousness.

Sociology suggests that where there is religion, there is church. The expression of the collective consciousness in search of the supernatural is made by a community through dialogue, and a physical place is

needed for this encounter with the Divine. “Church” is one name that we’ve used for these spaces in which people encounter the Divine.

### **Psychology**

Within psychology, I turn to the Austrian doctor and neurologist, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the father of psychoanalysis. Freud is not the most important representative in this field, but he is the most controversial with respect to religion and the existence of a supernatural being.

Freud explains religion by comparing it to the defense mechanisms of a child. According to Freud, children personify natural forces, elevating them to the category of protective forces, and this helps us cope as children with our feeling of impotence and helplessness in this world. As children, for instance, our feelings of helplessness are assuaged by the “protective deities” who are our parents. This psychological need for protection and assistance is manifested in moments of helplessness, when we find ourselves expressing innate religiosity and appealing to religion. This psychological phenomenon of searching for the supernatural often culminates in a person aligning him/herself with others—a community of people—who believe in and are also searching for protection and assistance, not so dissimilar from the assistance and protection that they received—or didn’t receive—from their parents.

I recall my studies of philosophy, particularly of the Greek philosophers. Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) stressed that “the human being is, by nature, a social being.” In Freud’s estimation, we align ourselves with others who feel the same impotence we feel and who assist us with their stories of the “protective deities” that are the Divine.

Here, we see that the study of psychology touches the deepest parts of our being, but that it risks relegating religious phenomena to a fruit of our own human condition.

### **Archaeology**

I now turn to archeology. At the site of the ancient Neolithic city of Çatalhöyük, in the Anatolia region of present-day Turkey, archaeologists have discovered the remains of one of the oldest cities built by humans. In this proto-city, which flourished 9,000 years ago, archaeologists have determined that homes also served as graves for the dead. Though 9,000 years separate us from the inhabitants of Çatalhöyük, they shared our custom of burying the dead. Thus, we find in Çatalhöyük a type of proto-liturgy with respect to the dead and to our human desire to remain close to our loved ones despite their exit from this world. We can deduce that the people of Çatalhöyük constituted a society that possessed a great

respect for the dead, perhaps even believing in a life beyond death. Such beliefs today are shared by those who form part of the social structures we call “churches.” While it would be premature to believe that religious communities existed in Çatalhöyük, we can infer that there were people in Çatalhöyük who were interested in preserving the memory of those who had gone before them.

You might be wondering how the custom of burying the dead is related to the definition of “church.” The rite of burying the dead is always undertaken by a caste or group of people who elaborate a certain liturgy—often by a priestly caste who occupy a role in the religious structure of the society. Thus, it seems, even archeology points us toward the conception and definition of “churches.”

If we were to discuss archeology, it would be a serious omission to overlook the religiosity of several other ancient peoples:

- the Sumerian people,
- the Greeks, with their famous pantheon of gods,
- the great Egyptian monuments dedicated to the dead, and the priestly caste and famous mummies of Egyptian civilization,
- the famous Etruscan tombs in Italy,
- the gods of the Roman Empire and its famous pantheon, and
- pre-Columbian cultures, including the religious monuments erected by the Mayans, as well as the famous mummies of Guanajuato.

Through history and archeology, then, we find traces of religiosity in the cultures of various civilizations.

### **What Theology Says About the Church**

So, where are we in answering our original question, of whether God, from the beginning of time, conceived of the Church, or of churches? If religiosity is consubstantial with the human being, the human need to believe might require a structure and a group to guide human religiosity. Within the sociological, anthropological, psychological and archaeological contexts we have outlined here, there appears the shadow of what we now refer to as “churches,” or as “the Church.” We now turn to the Church’s science—to theology, the queen of the sciences—to see what theology says about the Church and about churches.

Theology is the study of the Divine. The Greek roots of the word “theology” are *theos* (“God”) and *logos* (“the study of”). Theology systematically studies the relationship between God and humankind; therefore, theology would naturally ask about the nature of the Church.

A summary of the entire compendium of theology with respect to the definition of the Church can be found in the *Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church*, whose official version was published in Latin in 1997:

“This is the sole Church of Christ, which, in the Creed, we profess to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic” (LG 8). These four characteristics, inseparably linked with each other (cf. DS 2888), indicate essential features of the Church and her mission. The Church does not possess them of herself; it is Christ who, through the Holy Spirit, makes his Church one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, and it is he who calls her to realize each of these qualities. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 811).

Unfortunately, this definition corresponds to an exclusive vision of Church and fails to consider the universal dimensions of all people and cultures, and how it is that all people of all cultures manifest spirituality, even if they are not Catholic or have never known Catholicism.

The biblical foundation of the Church leads us to believe that Christ founded the one, true Church: “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church” (Mt. 16:18). Perhaps my initial question, addressed to God the Creator, might just as well have been asked of Christ, who is consubstantial with the Father, as highlighted in the Constantinopolitan Creed of the Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.). This, however, would neglect other manifestations of “church” throughout history and the transcendental nature of human spirituality that seeks a superior Being, the Creator, the Architect of all that exists.

### **The Necessity of the Other in Religion**

I’m particularly interested in the spiritual element – the spirituality – common to all humankind, which requires an “other” for a person to manifest his/her spirituality. History, anthropology, psychology, archeology and other sciences confirm that others are necessary, not only for my survival, but also for my personal and spiritual development. I know myself in relationship with and in contrast to others. I am unique, but I am not alone. I have my own thoughts, emotions, personality, characteristics and personality. Still, I need the “other,” the group or clan, a society, to help me grow in my spirituality.

### **The Church Offers Salvation**

What is the *raison d’être* of the Church? In its simplest form, without getting lost in the “jungle” of Catholic theology, the foundation of the Church and its reason for being is to offer us salvation.

So, what is salvation? And simultaneously, we must ask: Does the human person need to be saved? For those of us who believe in God and in God's only son, Jesus Christ—even beyond the controversies of the historicity of Jesus, the profession of faith in a Trinitarian God, and belief in a creed created as a political tactic to unify the empire under Constantine, as suggested by Fernando Conde Torrens in his work, *Year 303: Christianity is Invented*—we must show some respect for the great scholars who have dedicated their entire lives to the subject and have honestly written on the matter.

Does humanity need to be saved? Catholic theology says that we do. The anthropology of the book of Genesis notes the beauty of creation in its first two chapters, but then comes the unfortunate fall of humanity in the third chapter, due to disobedience to God (Gen. 3:1-24 ). The communion that Adam and Eve enjoyed with God in paradise was broken when they decided to trust the snake in the garden. Corruption ensued, and the punishment was death. So, yes, according to this anthropology, which had its source in ancient Babylonian literature, salvation is necessary.

A lot of ink has been spilled over the matter—much of it pointing to the fact that we, as Catholics, have our roots in the ancient Israelite culture, which, though separated from us by centuries, continues to be close to us through the 46 books of the Hebrew scriptures that we hear every Sunday. Our ancient Israelite ancestors shaped our beliefs on creation; they also shaped our belief in the fall of humankind and the sin that ended in the punishment of death. In this context, the role of the Church, or of churches, becomes clear: to lead humankind, with its unquestionable thirst for the spiritual, over the threshold of death, through the doorway of salvation, and into that spiritual reality for which we are destined by God for all eternity. As Saint Teresa of the Child Jesus once famously wrote: “I live without living in myself, and in such a way, I hope, I die, because I do not die!”

### **“We Believe in One...Church”—Now Divided**

But there are many obstacles and barriers to salvation. Cyprian of Carthage (200-258), in his attempt to justify why he fled during the great persecution of Emperor Decius (250 A.D.) first noted the need for the unity of the Church in his famous treatise, *De unitate ecclesiae*. For good or for bad, his treatise became the foundation for belief in a universal Church that saves. Cyprian's work is foundational in Roman Catholic ecclesiology, since he focused on the unity of the Church and cast aside the possibility of other churches—invalid “churches” that fail to offer salvation.

It is worth remembering the schism of the East and the West in 1054 A.D., when there was a rupture in the Church, and the hierarchs of both churches excommunicated one another, resulting in the Catholic Church of the East and the Catholic Church of the West. Many Catholics think that excommunication implies the invalid nature of another person's sacraments; they fail to realize that the Patriarch of Constantinople and the Patriarch of Rome (i.e., the pope) had excommunicated one another for centuries. Still, no one doubted the validity of the sacraments of either church. Much less did they question whether the two churches, with two excommunicated patriarchs, could generate salvation—which is what the universal Church offers in the person of Christ. “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mk. 16:16, Jn. 3:15, Jn. 3:18). More problematic still was the papal bull *Unam sanctam* of Pope Boniface VIII (1230-1303), who explicitly wrote that “It is absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman Pontiff.”

Other significant divisions occurred in the history of the Roman Catholic Church. Some of them are mentioned in a beautifully-written brochure published by Father Jayme Mathias:

- The Western Schism of 1378, when the cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church repented of having elected Pope Urban VI and proceeded to elect a rival pope, thus dividing the Roman Church and unleashing a diplomatic crisis that divided Europe and therefore church.
- The Reformation initiated by Father Martin Luther, a Catholic priest, who did not understand why the Roman Catholic Church was content with various heresies (such as the sale of indulgences) and various human traditions.
- The Declaration of Utrecht in 1889, whereby many Roman Catholics rejected the novel “dogma” of the purported “papal infallibility” – an attempt to reunite the Roman church as a result of the division caused by Pope Pius IX and his proclamation of the “dogma” of the “Immaculate Conception” of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

### **Is There Salvation Outside the Roman Catholic Church?**

As if to close with a flourish, the entire ecclesiological context of the Roman Catholic Church in the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) declared, *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (“There is no salvation outside the [Roman Catholic] Church”). This naturally leads to the conclusion that, if a person does not belong to the Roman Catholic Church, s/he will not be saved. Thus, if God chose merely the Roman Catholic Church as the depository and sole administrator of salvation, the entire human race is

in danger of perdition: All who do not belong to the Roman church are condemned—as if to suggest that all humanity should belong to the Roman church. This is, of course, hogwash.

What will happen to our sisters and brothers of the ancient Buddhist tradition? What will happen to our sisters and brothers of the Chinese culture, which is no less ancient and is also spiritually rich? How are we to judge our ancient Israelite ancestors who did not belong to the Roman Catholic Church? Or our Muslim sisters and brothers? Or those who have separated from the Roman church more recently—like our Anglican sisters and brothers, with the beautiful kaleidoscope of spirituality that they have generated? Do we have the courage to call them “sects,” in the same way that some pretend to call us, even though we are validly-ordained priests who transmit the faith of Christ our Savior and who self-identify as “Catholic but not Roman Catholic”? And what of the countless other churches that possess the same mission to preach and proclaim Christ throughout the world, even if outside the Roman church? Will we condemn the Orthodox Catholic Church, the Coptic Catholic Church, the Maronite Catholic Church, the Ethiopian Catholic Church, the Siro-Malabar Catholic Church, and the Armenian Catholic Church? The list is long, and we could go on, but the simple question is this: Do these churches generate salvation, or are they simply “sects” — or, even worse, are they a hoax?

John Paul I famously said, “God is Father, but even more God is Mother.” And being Father and Mother, would God allow any of God’s many children to be lost or shut out from eternal salvation simply because they weren’t Roman Catholic? Salvation is far greater than any church. It is generated by God’s only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh in the history of humankind. It is true that not all people of faith self-identify as Roman Catholic, but that doesn’t mean that they don’t believe in the same Christ who love and saves us all.

### **Yes, There Is Salvation Outside the Roman Catholic Church**

What do these “separated” churches—churches outside the Roman church—offer when they preach the Word of God in good faith and, at the same time, proclaim that Christ the Son of God came to save us? It is the great concern of Holy Mother Church—as I like to call the Roman Catholic Church—to offer salvation to all, as the Gospel of Saint Matthew underscores (Mt. 28:19-20). There are 76 verses in scripture, particularly in the New Testament, that speak of the biblical foundation of this theological reality: the unequivocal offering of salvation by Christ, who was made incarnate in Mary’s womb and became flesh (Mt. 1:18, Lk. 1:35, Jn. 1:14).

Salvation is the most transcendental legacy in the lives of all believers and of all people. It is the goal that every Christian pursues. Being pilgrims on this earth (Ps. 39:12, 1Pet. 1:1, Heb. 11:13), we hope to one day reach the end of our pilgrimage and to stand before the God who saves us. Yes, the theme of salvation is central to this discussion, since it is the ultimate goal of all who believe in Christ and who follow his teachings. From this foundational reality of our faith, which compels every individual to associate him/herself with others and to configure “church,” we can trace back to the “fall” of humankind, when, in the frailty of our condition, we betrayed and disobeyed God.

### **The People of God as a Prelude to the Church**

We rightfully ask how God remedied our fall. Sacred scripture richly shows the concern of God in remedying negative human behaviors and displaying divine goodness in response to human ingratitude. In an attempt to bring humankind back into right relationship with God, God spoke through the prophets in the hope of healing the wound and restoring the breakdown that had occurred in the relationship between God and humankind. In the scriptures, God chose patriarchs, judges, prophets, kings and queens, women and men—an entire people—to create a new alliance with God’s people and to indicate a path for the people to follow. Abraham’s call in the book of Genesis (Gen. 12) demonstrates God’s good will to restore what was lost and to create a bridge between God and humanity, with all the benefits that are implied when humankind lives in communion with the Divine. I would call this the beginning of a love story between God and humankind, even after the fall and even if we never find the word “church” in the Hebrew Scriptures.

I also share here what the *Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church* tells us about church, so that we might analyze these words.

The word “Church” (Latin *ecclesia*, from the Greek *ek-ka-lein*, to “call out of”) means a convocation or an assembly. It designates the assemblies of the people, usually for a religious purpose (Acts 19:29). *Ekklesia* is used frequently in the Greek Old Testament for the assembly of the Chosen People before God, above all for their assembly on Mount Sinai where Israel received the Law and was established by God as his holy people (Ex. 19). By calling itself “Church,” the first community of Christian believers recognized itself as heir to that assembly. In the Church, God is “calling together” God’s people from all the ends of the earth. The equivalent Greek term *Kyriake*, from which the English word

Church and the German *Kirche* are derived, means “what belongs to the Lord.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 751).

This paragraph of the *Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church* is a fine example of hermeneutics, of the interpretation of biblical texts. Though the word “church” does not appear anywhere in the Hebrew scriptures, great scripture scholars, employing hermeneutics, have interpreted the community, the chosen people of God, as a prelude to the Church. We might ask whether the Jewish people agree with this interpretation – but we all know that they are still awaiting the coming of the messiah and that they don’t use the word “church” to refer to themselves or to the places where they gather to worship God as a faith community. Many of our Jewish sisters and brothers died for their faith, as witnessed during the Holocaust, and still they do not believe that Christ was sent by God – much less recognize him as the Son of God.

How ironic, then, to consider that, in all 46 books of the Hebrew scriptures, there is not a single mention of the word “church” – particularly in light of the fact that the Second Vatican Council affirmed that there exists no salvation outside the Church! Paragraph 751 of the *Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church* may shed light on this. It shares that the word Church “designates the assemblies of the people, usually for a religious purpose.” Clearly, this ties back to our observations, through other sciences, that humankind manifests its religiosity with others – with a community that gathers “for a religious purpose,” to worship and communicate with the Divine. The question naturally arises: Would God only save those believers who are part of a specific community, or might it be the case that God could save humankind through any number of communities that assemble “for a religious purpose”?

### **We Manifest to Others Our Belief in God**

For now, let’s reserve the problematic question of whether God created the Church, or churches, or whether we, as human beings, created the Church. Instead, let’s return to the subject of community. Archeology, anthropology and history suggest that, since ancient times, a nucleus of religiosity has been found in all cultures and in all communities. There is no culture where you cannot find the figure of the shaman or the priest. As I’ve said before, human beings necessarily live in relationship to others, and humankind manifests its belief in God with others.

The entire context is paradoxical, since my only objective is to elucidate the path that humanity has traveled. In all stages of this

anthropological reality, there is one constant, which is the place of God in all these communities of people. It becomes difficult to frame the moments when these communities became “churches,” or when they became “the Church.” Clearly, from the first moment in which the members of these communities recognized their need of a transcendental Being, they were “church.” Even before any concept of salvation came into being, they appealed for the divine protection of themselves and of those who venerated the same Divine.

Thus, the road is long, and serious and honest research is required, for us to arrive at any conclusion that God would only save through a particular church that attempts to appropriate the word “Church” and to “trap” God, so that God can only save others through that “church” – rather than to believe that God continues to act and save through all the communities we know today as churches. Certainly, I’ll look forward to sharing future musings on this and other questions.

## CATHOLIC TERRORISTS

### **The Loss of Historical Memory**

Humanity has a problem, and it is the loss of our historical memory. It is said that animals, with their instinct for survival, never fall into the same hole twice. Human beings, on the contrary, do. That is why psychoanalyst Claude Steiner speaks of scripts, the *copioni di vita*. As humans, we repeat our mistakes, and, by constantly repeating them, we are led in the direction of five possible outcomes: loneliness, failure, prison, mental asylum, or death. Those are the options for us when the “scripts” of our mistakes are repeated and repeated and repeated and repeated. We fall into a mistake and, being unaware of the “scripts” of our own behavioral psychology, we fall again and again, harder each time, until our final fall results in the annihilation of despair or death.

In this work, I speak of religious terrorism, which can only be understood through such lenses as history and psychology. As human beings we easily forget what we’ve done. We fail to learn from our mistakes, and, within three generations, our historical memory is gone. Ask any young person today about the Vietnam War. S/he likely knows little about it. It was a war that killed countless people. Many who served their nation with great patriotism glimpsed the horrors of war and returned traumatized, maimed and/or with mental health issues. Yet our young people know precious little about the experiences of their grandparents and great grandparents who took part in this war.

This loss of historical memory is the first thing that comes to mind when I think of the psychological terrorism that often translates into religious terrorism. It springs from the same fundamentalism that contributed to recent attacks in Paris, Brussels and Spain. Who perpetrated these attacks? Fundamentalists who, in the name of God, sought to destroy others. It’s the same dynamic that we exercised in the Middle Ages, when we sought to recover the Holy Land during the Crusades. That was religious terrorism—but religious terrorism also manifests itself in the everyday life of many churches today.

### **Terrorism in the Church**

I share with you the story of the mother who came to baptize her child in our parish the other Saturday. I asked her where she’s from. She replied that she is from Louisiana. I said, “With all due respect, ma’am, can I ask you why you came all the way from Louisiana to Austin, Texas, to baptize your child? Are there no Catholic churches in Louisiana?” She replied, “Father, I couldn’t find a single Catholic church willing to

baptize my child because my husband and I aren't married by the Church—and the only church I could find that is willing to baptize him, is yours. Yours is the only church that didn't ask whether my husband and I are married by the Church. That's why I'm here—and if I have another child, I'd come here again for the next baptism." I know, the entire story is hard to believe. It also seems an instance of religious terrorism. To think that there are priests who, in the name of God and of the Church, discriminate against others, leaving them with the painful wound of rejection that is not easily healed!

I saw the effects of a similar religious terrorism that was perpetrated against my brother priests of the Roman Catholic Church, when they were stripped of their priestly office and/or forced from their parishes when it was discovered that they had relationships in the past, or when their bishops were misinformed by the terrible letters of parishioners. In such cases, most bishops care more about their own titles and positions, than they do about their own priests. And all those years that those priests dedicated to their ministry, and all those years of studies that they spent to achieve that dream, are lost. Such a lack of compassion might also be deemed religious terrorism, and the wounds that remain are unimaginably difficult to heal and often remain for life.

All forms of terrorism have a metaphysical background. They all have a cause, since, as Saint Thomas said, there is no effect without a cause. What is the cause of religious terrorism? "God"! In the name of God, we show great cruelty to others, particularly to those whom we judge to be living outside of God's commandments (Ex. 20). Our humanity leads us to jettison all human goodness in defense of God.

Tell me this isn't terrorism. Tell me this isn't how we are as human beings. We set ourselves up as judges and executioners of others, ignoring the humanity of those for whom we have no mercy.

### **Catholic Terrorism in the Past**

Various examples of Catholic terrorism immediately come to mind. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux wrote the Rule for the Knights Templar, the famous Crusaders who believed that, by destroying Muslims, they were helping Holy Mother Church to grow. These warrior-monks destroyed and killed, violated and mutilated, all in the name of God. It's a part of our history, and yet we've often overlooked it as Catholics.

Another even darker example comes to mind: the Inquisition. It was an extremely evil chapter in the history of our Holy Mother Church. Simply put, it was religious terrorism. Everyone suspected of heresy or witchcraft was burned or tortured. During the Inquisition, even Hadrian's "Bridge of Angels," one of the most beautiful bridges in the

world, was a place of torture and death. Yes, the Inquisition is another chapter in our history that we've often overlooked.

### **Terrorists Judge and Condemn**

Put simply, Catholic terrorists put themselves in place of God, and they judge and condemn others. It is not enough for terrorists to judge others, to seat them at the defendant's table. They also condemn them, and that is the act of terrorism. They are not content to be made in the *image* of God; they presume to *be* God. They presume to be the Architect, with the right to take from others the great gift of life.

As a Church, we have sometimes turned the page on the facts, all in the name of God, in order to judge, condemn and steal life from others. And this includes those who've come forth from the womb of Holy Mother Church: the priests and bishops who enjoy the luxury of judging and executing priests, crushing them like cockroaches. It's horrible. And they seem to have no theological, psychological or anthropological difficulty with what they do, believing that they are acting in the name of God. They put their selves in the place of God and say, with the French King Louis XIV, "I am the law. I am the state." And when "I am the law," and when "I am the state," I'm everything. I'm God!

### **The Psychology of Catholic Terrorists**

I've talked about the past. Now, we come to the present. I can provide some examples of Catholic terrorism in the Church today. I know many priests, my brothers, who were thrown out into the street because they were accused of having a relationship that didn't square with the Roman church's ideal of celibacy—which doesn't allow for exclusive relationships by its priests. So, my brother priests left the Church and were haunted by a psychological torture that damages and destroys the psyche. It was painful to see.

It's not difficult to diagnose the psychology of the people who do these things. It's done in the name of God and in the name of faith. It's as if people feel an obligation to defend God. And that is where the famous word "apologetics" comes from: I need to "defend" my faith, and those who oppose my faith can be annihilated or exterminated without it being considered a sin against the dignity of the human person, because, according to them, the person who doesn't believe in God isn't worthy of being called a child of God. It's better that such persons be annihilated. In the history of the Church, this has created a slippery slide, with those not being deemed children of God also being labeled as "children of Satan," "demoniacs" or "possessed." And with this, they are associated

with the maximum expression of the archetypal figure of the devil, the famous antichrist.

The greatest Catholic terrorists today are those who concentrate all their power on themselves, ignoring humanity and trampling on others. Such religious terrorism stems from ignorance: In the name of faith, the ignorant seek to destroy those who do not belong to their church. A medieval thinker once suggested that ignorance is much more dangerous than heresy. When we strip ourselves of our humanity, we become great terrorists, and, yes, we have had great terrorists in the history of the Church.

### **Vocation: God Calls Us to Life**

Is it possible that God truly calls these people and shares with them a “vocation” of harming others in God’s name? It’s important to speak to this, since God calls us to life. Formed in our mothers’ wombs and given the gift of life, we were called to life. And with this call to life, we receive an intrinsic mission to do good. That is our vocation. The challenge lies in the fact that we have countless misleading arguments about what “vocation” really means. Personally, I believe that God has called me to life, and that God has called me to love – since God is love (1Jn. 4:8) – just as God calls others to love. I cannot believe, then, that religious terrorism is the work of God, or that it’s God’s fault, because there’s also a place in this conversation for human freedom and free will. God calls us to good. God does not call us to evil. You don’t need a title or a university degree to realize this. The human being is able to distinguish when s/he does good and when s/he does evil.

If God calls us to life, and if life is beautiful and precious for us, then life must be beautiful and precious for others as well. It lies within us to do good, to live our lives, and to bring life to others, rather than destroy or allow ourselves to become pathogenic agents seeking to destroy humanity, seeking to destroy our sisters and brothers.

### **Acting in God’s Name**

Since we, the ministers of the Church, act in the name of God, you might wonder what the difference is between what we do in the name of God, and what religious terrorists do in the name of God. There is certainly a difference between what I do as a priest in the name of God, and what terrorists do. We all have the right to live. We all have the right to think for ourselves, and no one is obliged to think as others think – or as “the Church” thinks. None of us wants to live in a society where everyone thinks the same. Everyone, with the intellectual capacity s/he has, is entitled to think in his or her own way. I can only do evil in the

name of God if I am blinded by fanaticism and the need to defend my faith at any cost, including the need to resort to violence. The difference, then, between what I do as a priest and the violence that others perpetrate in the name of God is that everything that I do in the name of God is projected toward love and not violence. A famous Brazilian bishop, Hélder Câmara, once said, "Violence breeds violence, and it generates death." God is love, not death, and God manifested that love not only during Christ's life here on earth, but also through Christ's resurrection.

### **Apologetics and the "True Faith"**

I now turn to apologetics and the need we sometimes feel to convince others of what we think and of the way we see the world. I have a problem with the poisonous thinking whereby I would say, "I am a priest, so I am obliged to make you believe what I believe." My mission is not apologetics. It's not to force you to believe what I believe.

Some people feel an obligation to share the "true faith," which they believe they possess, and which is often synonymous with the faith of the Roman Catholic Church. I've always preferred to think that, as a priest, I communicate most effectively without words: through my actions, by loving and respecting others, and by making them feel loved, rather than judging them. That's my mission. It's something I'd rather communicate through my works than through any philosophical or theological discourse I could ever write.

### **From "God's Law," to Love**

So, what are we to do with the catechism and canon law and everything the Church has taught us? To some extent, laws help to regulate the disorder of society, but laws don't cause a person to live the spiritual dimension of life. To some extent, laws are necessary. Yes, we received the Law on Sinai (Ex. 20), but that same Law, which was necessary to some extent, was superseded by Christ's "enough" (Eph. 2:15) and was summarized in his commandment of love (Mt. 22:36-40, Mk. 12:28-31, Lk. 10:27). But love is not preached with words. It is lived through works.

Some people think only in two colors. They talk about "the Law of God" and how it prohibits certain actions. We say something is one color when it suits us, or another color when it doesn't. We have forgotten an important detail of the law: the spirit of the Law. The Law has a spirit—just as we're accustomed to thinking that we have a spirit and/or a soul. We are form, matter and spirit. The Law also has a spirit. Fundamentalists argue that the scriptures should be literally interpreted.

The spirit of the Law suggests otherwise. Really, would God explicitly write in a book that it is an abomination for a man to love and/or have a relationship with another man? Certainly not. What a false notion, but still some say, "But it's the Word of God! God wrote those words!" Interestingly, nowhere in scripture do we find Jesus, who is the Word of God made flesh, condemning homosexuality. As a priest and as a lover of God's Word, I have yet to find such a passage in scripture!

### **The Lack of a Scriptural Basis for Condemning Homosexuality**

The words "homosexual" and "homosexuality" are in the Hebrew scriptures. Nor do we find such words as "gay" or "lesbian," *et cetera*. The Hebrew scriptures, though, were read by the likes of Saint Paul, who interpreted God's Law in light of the society in which he lived, and in ways that suited him. Paul lived in a patriarchal society, where men were expected to dominate women and to obtain wealth by having many children. It seems that such dynamics have existed since the creation of the world and the creation of humankind.

I recall saying this in the past and having one woman ask me, "But, Father, are you suggesting that homosexuality has always existed, as if it were natural?" To be clear, this is nothing I'm "suggesting"; I'm stating it as a fact. Homosexuality is natural. It occurs in nature and in other species of animals. By no means is it "unnatural." It is not some pathological phenomenon, as we once thought. It is intrinsic to the human person, even if we've ignored it and, in many places, refused to accept it.

In the history of the Church, homosexuality was viewed as something to be marginalized, as a disease or perversion. It was considered a moral disorder. We no longer believe it to be a disease or a perversion, except in some instances, including pedophilia. In this respect, we would all do well to read Daniel Helminiak's work, *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, which helps readers to interpret various biblical texts. That little book *es una bomba*. "It's a bomb," we'd say in Spanish. Without a doubt, we need more literature on the subject: a solid bibliography with a broad, clear, serious vision that goes much further than the affirmation of banalities.

### **Living the Essence or the True Spirit of the Law**

Still, some reply, "But the Word of God forbids certain things! Shouldn't we obey and live the Word of God?" Those who say this typically overlook the spirit of the Law, the spirit of the cultures in which these writings originated, and the anthropological environments in which those people lived. For those ancient people, the coexistence of a

man with another man, or of a woman with another woman, was an inconvenience, to the point that it was declared illicit. But that was not the Word of God. If it were the Word of God, how could Christ have overlooked this and not stressed it during his life? We have no evidence that he ever brought up the topic, not even when topics of seeming sexual deviance arose, as in the case of the woman caught in adultery, whom he refused to condemn (Jn. 8). Was Jesus changing the Law? No. Instead, he was calling us to live the essence of the Law, the true spirit of the Law, a truer interpretation of the Law, which is love—a word that has many connotations and has in many ways lost its true essence. That’s why I preach the spirit of the Law. So, when people say that God forbids certain things, like relationships between homosexual persons, I respond that I’ve never seen a scriptural source that says this, that hasn’t been altered or mistranslated in the course of history. *Traduttore, traditore*, we say in Italian. “Translators are traitors.” And so we falsify the Word of God, justifying the details we obviously wish to condemn for whatever reason.

But there’s one thing of which I’m sure: God *doesn’t* condemn a person for being homosexual.

### **The Suffering That Results from Misinterpreting the Bible**

Throughout history, many people have suffered as a result of the misinterpretation of the Bible on such issues as homosexuality—even leading to seminarians being thrown out of the seminary because of their sexual inclination. This, too, is Catholic terrorism.

We return to the matter of vocation. All of us are called to life. All of us are called to live better and to improve ourselves every day. All of us are called to serve others in love. Sometimes we discover a desire to give ourselves in service to the community, and, in this context, some discover their vocation to priestly ministry. So, of course, it’s religious terrorism to reject a person’s desire to live a better life and to serve others in love, simply because of his/her psychological and/or sociological tendencies—just because s/he is gay. This is serious. It’s certainly not Christian, and it doesn’t come from God.

There’s a phrase in modern Church history that has been interpreted in many ways. It’s been flipped “like a tortilla,” as we say in Spanish, over and over and over. It’s the phrase of Pope John Paul I, Albino Luciani, who said that God is Father, but that God is also Mother. Indeed! With that phrase, John Paul I “flipped the tortilla.” If we were honest, we sometimes flip people like tortillas, too. We take seminarians with a great desire to serve—people who believe they can better serve others through the priesthood, people who have the qualities and capacity and who spend three to eight years of their lives in the seminary—and then, when

it's discovered that they're gay or lesbian, we expel them. That is terrorism. And it's cruel. Who are the architects of this cruelty? Priests and bishops and the formation directors in our seminaries, who act as executioners rather than modeling the love and fellowship of Christ. Until I'm proven wrong, that's what I believe about the historical Jesus: His life was one of love and fellowship. But, purportedly to preserve their faith and religion, these priests and bishops expel, exclude, and "excommunicate" others. They condemn others and destroy their dignity. It's terrorism in the name of God.

### **Purity and True Holiness**

Once, a priest answered me, saying, "What's wrong with keeping our seminaries 'pure' and 'holy', like the Israelites in the Old Testament?" I replied that purity doesn't come from being gay or not being gay. Purity doesn't come from eating pork or not eating pork (Lev. 11:8). True purity helps us live a better life, a life of love, a life projected toward the good. People can be gay or lesbian and can generously share of their lives doing good for others—and being gay or lesbian takes nothing from the goodness of their actions. We've forgotten that the Old Testament was an interpretation of a human and divine reality, that as humans we can be extremely cruel, and that we need to aspire to the divine. Sometimes there's a chasm between what we believe and what we live, between our faith and praxis, between our spirituality and the way we live.

There's a lot of cruelty in the Hebrew scriptures, but, if we were honest, there's a lot of cruelty in the world today, too. Do we really think that we're holier than those who lived in biblical times, than those who had direct communication with God—like Abraham and Sarah, our ancestors in the faith? I don't think so. We're all humans, and holiness is learned. So, as humans, we're called to perfect ourselves, like well-behaved children. Holiness is just that: behaving well. Holiness is respecting others. Holiness is tolerating others. Holiness is accepting others as they are. That is true holiness.

### **The Total Limbo of the World Today**

One problem is that we live in a world filled with technology and so much information. We're so bombarded with information, that what we see and hear becomes superficial. And we find ourselves in total solitude, in total desperation, or, to use the famous image of Saint Augustine, we find ourselves in total limbo. That's the world in which we live: We find ourselves in total limbo. We live in a world where it's increasingly difficult to be self-reflective. The thought of the great Greek philosophers endures and, in many ways, and has not been superseded. Still, we cast

aside philosophy, we fail to read the philosophers whose thought could enrich our society, and we find ourselves in a desert of ideas. Their thought is still valid: the philosophy of Plato and Socrates, the philosophy of Anaximenes and Anaximander, the philosophy of good living, the philosophy that causes us to search for ourselves, and the philosophy of “know yourself.” Still, many people today are lost.

### **Who’s a Saint?**

Philosophy is humanity, and all humanistic endeavors enrich the people who comprise the Church—since the Church cannot exist without people. The true saint, then, is the person who is truly human, the person who possesses a great capacity to hate, but who channels that capacity towards love.

In today’s world, amid the sea of hatred, confusion, war and violence in which we are immersed, who is the saint? The saint is not the person who works miracles. The saint is the person who is truly human, who possesses the capacity and philosophy to change the course of history and to more fully humanize the Church, making it not only more human, but also holier and much more Christian.

### **The Problem of Science and Modern Philosophy**

You might wonder whether there’s a conflict between contemporary philosophy and science, and the tradition that we have received from the Church. Pope John Paul II wrote an encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*, which I very much like. It analyzes the current state of the human being, and projects it into the current state of God. Please allow me to explain.

*Veritatis Splendor* is one of the least studied and least known encyclicals of John Paul II. It’s an extremely philosophical and theological encyclical, projecting the human person in his/her humanity and opening him/her to a spiritual reality. John Paul II equips us with the wings of spirituality, allowing the human person to become divine. Contemporary science and philosophy attempt the opposite: They put God aside, raising up other “gods” and perpetuating the same story and the same anthropology that has occurred throughout history: When the human person desires to be like God, s/he ends in total annihilation. Friedrich Nietzsche comes to mind: “God is dead.” And the thought of Ortega y Gasset: “I am myself and my circumstances.” What a lie! You are not “you and your circumstances.” You exist insofar as you are in relationship with others, and when you are in relationship with others, it is no longer you. You can no longer conjugate verbs in the singular: “You” becomes “we”!

And so, when we discover that we exist in relationship to our environment and to all of humanity, we have no choice but to lift our eyes to the Infinite. It is then that we discover the reality of the Divine that is in us and is around us, and is in others.

Contemporary philosophy is not new in its desire to push God to the periphery. That's what happened in the French revolution (1789-1799) and also during the Bolshevik revolution of 1917: God was deleted from the human being – to the point that all the ingredients in the cauldron of communism and the Bolshevik revolution left us forgetting God and believing that the human being was the maximum expression of creation. It was a failed attempt by humanity to live without God.

### Vicars of Christ

You might wonder whether God works in and through certain people in a special way and whether some people, like the pope, might be “vicars of Christ” in our world. If we understand the word “vicar” in its true semantic, topological, sociological, historical and theological sense – as acting on behalf of another – we are *all* vicars. We all have the obligation to represent the other. That's what it means to be a “vicar.”

Despite our shortcomings, we are all vicars of Christ – even with our sorrows and mistakes and imperfections. In our imperfection, we find perfection in the person of Jesus, who was perfect and who, according to the Gospel of Saint Matthew, challenges us to “be perfect as [his] Father is perfect” (Mt. 5:48). In all our humanness, we are vicars of Christ. Christ did not become an angel; he became flesh. He had feelings and emotions, giving us hope that the feelings and emotions we experience – the same feelings and emotions that can sometimes be toxic to us and to others – can be made perfect and be translated into holiness.

Yes, we can be vicars of Christ, and I have no doubt that there are many people in the history of the Church who have been vicars of Christ. That's why I believe in the Church, and that's why I love the Church – because there have been people of great spiritual depth who have recognized and enfleshed the goodness of God in their person and in their words and actions. Their lives proclaim, with Saint Paul, “It is not I who live, it is Christ who lives me” (Gal. 2:20)! They are vicars of Christ.

We can all be vicars of Christ. In the gospel according to Luke, when the apostles say to Jesus, “Teach us to pray,” he doesn't respond with a prayer that begins, “My Father.” He taught them to pray, “Our Father” (Lk. 11:1). In this simple encounter, if we believe this to be the Word of God, Jesus constitutes us as a people – as sisters and brothers of one another – and as children of God. And the pseudonymous letter of Peter goes farther: We are a holy, royal, priestly people (1Pet. 2:9) – each with

our own call and mission based on who we are. As a priest, I am not superior to the gardener who cuts my grass, or to the man who paints my office, or to the woman who cleans houses. Absolutely not. She is a daughter of God, and we both possess our own mission and function within the Body of Christ. Identifying myself in an anthropological dimension and projecting that to the theological dimension, I realize that I am no greater than anyone else by the simple fact of being a priest or a bishop or even the pope. We are all sisters and brothers of one another. We are all called to live our mission. And we are called to always live in the relationship that Pope John Paul II referred to in Santo Domingo as “the civilization of love.”

### **Holy Obedience**

Some think that bishops have a special ministry, that they stand in the place of God, and that we owe them a certain obedience. In the life of the Church, we often refer to it as “holy obedience.” In reality, “holy obedience” is a practical invention of the Church, used to manipulate and subjugate. If I love you, I don’t need to be “obedient” to you, because I’m willing to do those things that are for my good and your good and the good of the community. So, obedience isn’t necessary. Love includes and supersedes obedience. If I love you, and if you ask in love that I do something, I’ll of course do it with love. When we use the qualifying adjective “holy” for obedience, we do so to manipulate. As priests and bishops, we’re experts at that.

When I was in the seminary, a priest used to say, “The one who obeys can never be wrong.” How absurd. If you’re my superior, and you ask me to poison my bishop or to kill another person, I cannot obey you and say I was acting out of “holy obedience.” “Blind obedience” is a sophistry. In the name of “obedience,” we cannot commit acts that undermine the dignity of others. We simply can’t.

True obedience is always the fruit of love and communion. When there is communion between the priest and his/her bishop, there is no difficulty in living the virtue of obedience. Too often in the Church, the obedience lived by far too many clergy has been a manipulation; it’s a way of keeping others under the radar of one’s influence. That is not obedience. That’s a grave offense against freedom and human dignity.

### **Poverty is Not Christian**

So, if obedience can be used to control and manipulate others, can the same be said of the other two traditional vows of religious life—of poverty and chastity? To a certain extent, yes. Let’s begin with poverty.

Poverty is not a virtue. Who wants to live with dirty clothes? Or, who wants to live in a house that's falling down—like some of the rectories that our bishops have assigned us to? It's even worse that some priests are assigned to parishes that don't have rectories. The implicit message: "You will live in poverty." That's not Christian.

One theological and historical argument for evangelical poverty is the assertion that Christ was born in a manger and lived a poor life. What a lie! This is disproved by the very same gospels that suggest that the magi brought riches to the home of Jesus' parents (Mt. 2:11), and that Jesus had a treasurer (Jn. 12:6). Where there's a treasurer, there's money to manage! So, it's not necessarily true that Jesus lived a poor life.

Human beings are *not* called to live in poverty. Instead, we are called to use the resources we have, to overcome the challenges of life and to create better lives for ourselves. To live in poverty and ruin, with broken shoes, is nothing to which anyone aspires.

Poverty, as I understand it, is knowing how to share what we have, what God has given us, and not being attached to those things as if they were the maximum expression of the treasure that we possess—because all earthly treasures pass away (Mt. 6:19-20). And our very lives end. Instead, a true life of poverty means sharing what we have. The Church would have us believe that our religious—like the Franciscans, Capuchins and Dominicans—live in poverty. Ha! They live in palaces, where they lack nothing. Any suggestion that they are materially poor is a lie. How can you call yourself "poor" when you lack nothing? It's a farce. It's another way in which the Church has manipulated its religious, and, as a result, many good, smart people of tremendous faith and intelligence have unfortunately lived the lie of evangelical "poverty" as an expression of "humility," believing that Jesus lived a life of poverty worthy of imitation. There was no richer person in history than the Son of God, and there is no biblical proof that he indeed lived a life of poverty. God the Father was with him, as was God the Holy Spirit, and, as a result, Christ shared a wealth of freedom, peace and salvation with the world.

### **Chastity: To Ignore a Person's Sexuality is to Ignore that Person**

Now that we've talked about obedience and poverty, we turn to chastity and its relationship to religious terrorism. Chastity and celibacy are the "virtues" that have brought the Church the most problems, since sexuality is intrinsic to human nature. Anthropology teaches us that human beings are, by nature, sexual. And this is confirmed by psychology. For this reason, to ignore a person's sexuality is to ignore that person. Let me say that again, well aware of what I'm saying: To ignore a person's sexuality is to ignore that person. How can we ignore

sexuality, which is not only intrinsic in human nature, but is necessary in our lives?

Sexuality is beautiful. Sexuality, said a French writer, is divine. Sexuality is delicious. Sexuality is something natural and innate. The act of restricting sexuality, then, in order to make a person “holy”, overrides sexuality in the name of “holiness,” and the worst aberration of all occurs when we deny a person’s sexuality and humanity, because those are the means by which we achieve holiness and perfection.

### **The Error and Contradiction of Condemning Sexuality**

How is it possible that Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas, with all the intelligence they possessed, did not realize the serious mistake into which they fell, of condemning sexuality? Why would anyone do this? The Greek school of hylomorphism taught that the spirit of a person is trapped in his/her body – that we are prisoners in our own bodies, and that our bodies damage and destroy us and our spirits. And sexuality is part of that “evil” body. For this reason, the great sages in the history of the Church couldn’t go beyond such thoughts, to discover the delight, the importance, and the beauty of human sexuality. Without sexuality, there is no reproduction, and without reproduction, there is no humanity – and it was God who commanded us, “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28)!

The Church’s argument against sexuality, then, is a great contradiction, with those messengers and missionaries of Christ denying the sexual dimension of their lives in order to be “saints,” when, in reality, they are denying themselves. They are denying the reality of who they are and the life that is generated in this world through the procreation of those who share themselves with others in love.

### **The Thesis of the Celibate Christ**

Within Holy Mother Church, there’s a prevailing thesis that, because Christ was celibate, chastity is lived in both human and Christological dimensions. But wait: Who said that Christ was celibate? Protestant German theologian Rudolf Karl Bultmann, a representative of the search for the historical Jesus, focused his research on the historicity of the person of Jesus. Needless to say, Bultmann didn’t conclude that Jesus was celibate. So, what are we doing when we imitate a “celibate” Christ?

As priests in the Roman church, we gave up having a wife and children. We were told the Church was our “spouse,” and that we were the “fathers” of many “children” – our sisters and brothers. This created a power distance between us and those who were programmed to obey their priests. I’ve since come to see that priests are not fathers (Mt. 23:9).

Priests are brothers and sisters. God alone is Father, the Creator of all. We dare not put ourselves in the place of God.

### **The Neurosis of Sexual Abuse in the Roman Catholic Church**

Sexuality is *not* incompatible with religiosity. On the contrary, one's sexuality enriches one's religious experience. The person who lives his/her sexuality is healthy, while the one who is forbidden to live his/her sexuality is more prone to psychosis and neurosis. Needless to say, the repression of one's sexual nature is neither natural nor healthy.

What damage results when we attempt to repress our human nature? When the human sexual inclination is prohibited, it manifests itself in aberrant ways—often in extravagant or licentious ways, or in the expression of sexuality in a way that is void of love, respect, communion, and acceptance of the other. And that, of course, lies at the root of the clergy sexual abuse crisis in the Roman Catholic Church.

What happens in sexual abuse? When we seek to possess the other, or when we seek to impose ourselves on the other without his/her consent—particularly if the other doesn't possess the ability to reject us—that is sexual abuse. If we express our sexuality with another, but s/he does not accept or does not share with us his/her sexuality, that is abuse. Such aberrations are perpetrated by Roman Catholic clergy, since their repressed human sexual inclinations find expression—if not in healthy ways, then in explosive, aberrant, abusive, ways.

A healthy sexuality results when we share our sexuality with another who desires to share it. Such sexuality is sacred. It's divine. To use the words of Dan Brown, who isn't especially beloved by the Roman church, particularly by the *Opus Dei*—it is holy.

### **A Holy Sexuality**

Inhibiting sexuality is not holy. Quite the contrary. Recall the wisdom of Cardinal José Saraiva Martins, the prefect emeritus of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints: "The true saint is the one who is human." And if we are human, we have a sexual nature. And if we are indeed sexual beings, we are called to live our sexuality in healthy, life-giving ways that result in freedom, respect for the other, communion with the other, and a better life for both.

Psychology has shed considerable light on this matter. Human behavior is extremely complex, but, at the same time, it is very simple. This seems a contradiction: Human nature is so simple that we can display and/or decipher it with a few words and/or simple acts, yet it is so complex that it requires an entire scientific discipline to fully understand it. Yes, psychology challenges us to know ourselves.

### **To Be, to Have and to Know**

People who know themselves possess the ability to survive much longer than those who do not know themselves. Have you ever stopped to consider what you want for yourself? There is a fundamental drive in human nature to be, to have, and to know. Being, having, and knowing are intrinsic to human nature and to the human search for one's self. We want to be. We want to have. And we want to know.

We want to be. We want to be able to say, "I am." Problems thus arise when our focus on ourselves leads us to forget the other.

We want to have. We want to be able to say, "I have." The problem lies not in possessing things, but in not sharing the things we possess.

We want to know. We want to be able to say, "I know." But, knowledge and wisdom for a person's own sake are useless, since wisdom is meant to be shared with others, and, as Jesus suggested, the only unforgivable sin is speaking against the Spirit of Truth (Mt. 12:31).

There is great power in being, having and knowing. With them, we have the capacity to become saints and great people in the history of humankind. We also risk becoming great tyrants in the same history. We can be great oases of love and tenderness and peace. And we can also be ticking time bombs, poisoning and destroying humanity like the atomic bombs that were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6, 1945.

### **The Ignorant Who Harm Humanity**

We don't need to exert great effort to discover ignorant people in the history of the Church—including priests, bishops, and even popes—who've perpetrated great harm against humanity in the name of faith and in the name of God. The example that comes to mind is the 22-year-old man who, in an act of terrorism, swept away the lives of over 15 people in Barcelona, Spain. Without a doubt, he was ignorant. He lacked the necessary humanistic training to lead him to believe that the human person possesses great value and is not to be harmed. And we label him a "terrorist." In many cases, terrorists are simply ignorant people who lack education, who lack possibilities, and who lack humanistic training. They believe themselves to be acting "in the name of God." They believe themselves to be "vicars" of Christ, when, in reality, they are vicars of death.

### **Preferring to Be a Victim, Rather Than a Perpetrator**

Some people are convinced that they possess the truth, and that they are part of the "true Church." What are we to do with them? In the

presence of such people, I find recourse in the words of Jesus: “If someone strikes you on the right cheek, offer him the left” (Mt. 5:39). In such instances, I, through my kindness, respect, and silence, prefer to be a victim, rather than to be a perpetrator. In those moments, I don’t impose on you my faith, my religion, and my God. Instead, in silence, I manifest my intention to love and respect you, and I am teaching you a lesson. Even in silence, I am educating you on the great love of God. I will love you. I will not condemn you. I will show you that, if I were in your shoes, I might make the same mistakes in the name of faith and God and religion. I will be in relationship with you, without forcing you to be like me. And we will build together a relationship of love, peace and communion.

As religious, we pretend to believe that we can make converts of others with many words and with many speeches. What a lie. It doesn’t work that way—particularly in a “fast food” culture, where we use things one day and throw them out the next, and where more information is thrown at us than we can absorb. We do well to remember the lessons we teach in silence.

Silence doesn’t mean, “Do nothing.” Instead, our silence says, “Look, I’m here.” “I love you.” “I respect you.” “I don’t condemn you.” “Go in peace.” “Do not sin anymore.” “Your faith has saved you.”

I’m reminded of the words of an Italian bishop, who, at a meeting of the Italian Episcopal Conference, once said, “The problem is not a lack of missionary priests in the Church; the problem is the lack of missionary people in the Church.” By our words and actions—and even by our silence—we can all be missionaries of Christ in our world.

### **Formation and Humanization**

Terrorists lack formation and training. They lack humanization. And that’s exactly why terrorism—and religious terrorism—persist. If you have a good formation and a healthy spirituality, you’ll be a good person, a good priest, a good Christian, a good carpenter, a good housewife, *et cetera*. When you discover and appreciate the humanness of others, you will find that you are not able to commit acts of religious terrorism. You’ll find yourself preferring to be the victim, rather than the victimizer. And you’ll find that the silence of your actions shouts, “I cannot be at your level. I am a person of peace, and you are a person of violence. You are a terrorist, and I am not a terrorist.” Imagine communicating this in silence!

### **The Mental Health of Terrorists**

Because of the concern for mental health here in the U.S., I might suggest that there is a high correlation between religious terrorism and the lack of mental or psychological health. Psychology and spirituality are closely linked: Psychology is the study of a person's behavior, and a person's spirituality is part of his/her religious behavior.

Those with less mental health are at risk of being in poor spiritual health as well. Instead of doing good, they can easily find themselves doing evil. They are prisoners. They are ill. And it is even sometimes said that they do not understand what they are doing or the consequences of their actions. It's not my style to condemn such persons, though the spiritual evil committed by them is real.

I greatly appreciate the focus on mental health here in the U.S. A person who enjoys psychological health will most often enjoy spiritual health as well. Such persons bear fruit in their lives. For this reason, we shouldn't too quickly dismiss the mental health of candidates for the priesthood and religious life—indeed the mental health of all persons in our churches, in our institutions, and in our society.

Those who enjoy less mental health harm others. They become a problem for others. We all know people who enjoy less psychological health. They live with their illusions, they commit mad and sometimes brutal acts, and they can destroy in a moment the things that others have worked their entire lives to build. I pity them. Their neuroticism and frustration lead them to do terrible things. And we must be cautious with them.

Awareness is the best antidote for remedying mental health issues in our communities, in our society, and yes, in the Church.

### **From the Crucifixion to Glory**

Christ is the Church, and we are the Church of Christ. We are the ecclesial community that sprang from Christ's, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Lk. 22:19). How fantastic this is! As branches on the vine (Jn. 15:5), we bear fruit. And as part of the tree of the sacrifice of the cross, we live the theology of the cross. Yes, we carry the cross and are persecuted.

This theology of the cross, as illuminated by an eloquent cardinal at the Santo Domingo Conference, is necessary for the Church—and it is necessary in our spirituality. We cannot arrive at glory, except through the cross. Christ endured suffering and death. Far from dehumanizing Christ, like the Monophysites of the first centuries of Church history, we embrace the humanity of Christ, and we embrace our own humanity.

We will always have terrorists in our Church and in our society. Still, we are confident that Christ will continue to lead and guide the Church, helping us to bear fruit and guiding us from death to eternal life.

## AN INTERVIEW WITH FATHER LIBARDO ROCHA

by Father Jayme Mathias

*Father Jayme recently sat down with Father Libardo to ask him some questions and to better know him. Here is the conversation between the two of them.*

**Fr. Jayme:** In this book, you ask the question, “Who are we?” But, who are *you*? Tell us about the young Libardo Rocha, about his family and his experiences in Colombia, and his call to minister to God’s holy people.

Fr. Libardo: Who am I? I certainly don’t want to answer in an elusive way, but it was José Ortega y Gasset who famously said, “I am I and my circumstances.” We are the fruit of our environment. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau suggested, we are born good, and society corrupts us. In part, Rousseau is right: Ontologically, the human person is good, made in the image of God, but conditioned by society.

In what circumstances did I grow up? And by whom was I conditioned? I was born in a Catholic family that didn’t practice its faith. And the strange thing about my vocation is that, even as a child, I wanted to be a priest—without knowing then of the great responsibilities entailed in being a priest. I wanted to be a priest, not as a kind of *fuga mundi*, as a way of escaping or running from the world. I wanted to be a priest, despite the fact that my family didn’t practice our faith. I’ve always said that my father was much more religious than my mother. My dad is no longer with us; he’s in a better place, as we often say as priests. My mom is still with us. She is very generous, and I’m the oldest of my siblings.

I’ve asked myself on more than one occasion, and I’ve often contemplated why I am a priest today, or when it was that I received the call to priestly life. It’s a question that we’re often asked as priests when we visit parishes, or when curious young people attempt to compare their own lives and calls to the lives and calls of others. I didn’t feel a call to priestly ministry on a particular date. Instead, it was

a process. It was something I discovered over time. All I know is that, since I was a child, I always wanted to be a priest. Once I was asked: "Do you want to be a priest in order to be like Christ, or to serve others?" I remember my answer: "Both. I want to be like Christ, in service to others!"

I recall my studies in the minor seminary: They were the best years of my life. They were years of respect, filled with a spirit of study. During my high school studies in the minor seminary, I fell in love with science. I'll always fondly remember my minor seminary experience: That's where I learned to pray, and that's where my priestly vocation became much stronger.

After the minor seminary, I did my undergraduate studies at the Pontifical Catholic University in the beautiful city of Quito, Ecuador. My parents were friends of the archbishop of Guayaquil, and, knowing that I always wanted to be a priest, he said, "Come with me, and have an experience outside your country." So, I went, and I did my philosophical studies in Ecuador.

After my theological studies, I was immediately ordained a priest, and I was sent to Rome, to continue my graduate studies in dogmatic theology, first at the University of the Holy Cross, and then at the University of Saint Thomas Aquinas.

Though I'm an outgoing person, I love keeping a low profile. I love not being the center of attention. In the course of my academic life as a seminarian and as a priest, though, I discovered another vocation: teaching! I love to teach. I love to learn, and I love sharing what I've learned. Someone once said, "You can't give what you don't have." I daily "feed" myself with theological and philosophical works, and with all sorts of reading. I especially love theology. I'm continually searching for the God who created me and who created the Church, and who granted me the grace to be part of the Church and the grace to preach.

After being in Rome for 24 years, where I taught theology and pastored four parishes, I felt it necessary to leave that life behind. I'm a firm believer in the priesthood of women. I support the marriage of priests. I share the vision of a Church where priests can manifest their sexuality without fear of condemnation or of being "burned at the stake." I had no option but to leave the church I loved, to search for the Church of which I had always dreamed.

By the grace of God, and through the bridges built between priest-friends, I discovered the Independent Catholic Church. And now I can say that I am truly free. I am happy. My life has taken on new meaning within the Independent Catholic Church, which has welcomed me with open arms and allowed me to imitate Christ and serve others, pouring out my life as a gift to others. I feel I'm right where I should be, right where I've always dreamed of being – where I can be a good priest in the service of others, in the service of my Church, and in full communion with my sisters and brothers in ministry. In a spirit of humility, I might say with Saint Paul, "By the grace of God, I am what I am" (1Cor. 15:10)!

**Fr. Jayme: Tell us about your formation in the Roman Catholic Church.**

Fr. Libardo: If there is anything for which those of us who were ordained in the Roman Catholic Church should be extremely grateful, it is the fact that, from an academic point of view, we received a very solid preparation.

I believe that I had a very good priestly formation, but there's also one element of seminary life that I can't gloss over: The Roman Catholic seminary system has a way of disfiguring the personality of its seminarians and priests. It's in the seminary that many seminarians learn to live a double life: They can't manifest their innate sexual inclinations, which, in repressed silence, become toxic. I've seen this damage and corrupt far too many seminarians, who wisely created a double personality to defend their privacy and their sexual inclinations. It results in the wearing of "masks" by seminarians and priests. During *carnaval* in Rio de Janeiro, everyone wears a mask, and, when the *carnaval* ends, they begin searching for the masks

that they'll wear the next year. It's the same in the seminary, except that we trade our *carnaval* masks for iron masks. We suppress our humanity. We repress our affections. And sometimes we become heartless men. Those who are unable to manifest their emotional inclinations are not free, and there's a certain implicit but very effective brainwashing that takes place in the seminary—with ideals of purity and obedience and the imitation of Christ. Only later do you discover that your brother priests have never lived a life of chastity. It's an inhumane fallacy, with formation directors in seminaries not prepared to handle the most delicate part of our future priests: their affections, emotions and feelings.

So, when you leave the seminary, you're at risk of not knowing who you are beneath the masks you've assumed. And, if it weren't for the faith you possess—in the contemplation of the mercy of Christ—you'd be left with nothing.

While I would say that my philosophical and theological formation in the seminary was fantastic, I also know the great desolation of the seminary system. It's a reality that demands change, if our future priests are to be people consecrated to God, in touch with their feelings and emotions, and unafraid of being condemned or "burned at the stake" for the reality of their inmost being.

And the worst part is when a priest wakes up to discover his disillusionment with the Roman Catholic Church. That's when he receives the worst of the worst. After six years of minor seminary, six years of major seminary, and another five years of specialization—that's 17 years of your life dedicated to becoming a priest—when the Church wants to suspend you or reduce you to the lay state, the signature of a bishop is enough for you to be cast into the streets, like a beggar. And all your studies of philosophy and theology mean nothing in "the real world," which prefers the skills of doctors, lawyers, engineers and those who work in technology, over those who've studied the theological and philosophical sciences—which are otherwise quite useless in today's world. So, despite your formation and education, you're left as a stranger in the

night, not knowing where you're going. Worse still is the solitude, since you're totally abandoned by those who lived with you, prayed with you, worked with you, and supposedly loved you in the past.

So, young priests leave the seminary with a solid academic formation, but the God they met in their theological studies quickly fades, and the beautiful dream they had of living the priesthood soon becomes a nightmare. And while some priests have had the fortune of "waking up," many others remain in the lethargy of their loneliness, suffering and failure.

**Fr. Jayme: Tell us about the models, mentors and teachers you're had.**

Fr. Libardo: I have fond memories of the rectors of the seminars where I studied. They were good, dedicated, prayerful, spiritual men who loved teaching and looked for ways to share their love of learning with their students.

Cardinal Bernardino Echeverría was a great friend and confidant. He entrusted me with ministry and ordained me a priest.

Another great mentor and friend was Carlos Altamirano, a simple but holy bishop. He wasn't a great intellectual, but he was a great father, a great teacher, a great friend, and a great model. His priestly goodness was worthy of imitation.

I wouldn't say, though, that I've tried to imitate any of these great friends and teachers that I have had, because I've always been aware of the fact that each of us has "clay feet" – and statues with clay feet are always at risk of being toppled. My only model has been Christ, the man I look at, study, and discover through the gospels and Pauline letters every day. He inspired me and continues to inspire my way of life. He is the only model for my life, and all others are friends and brothers. As Saint Paul says in his letter to the Galatians: "It is not me who lives. It is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). That's how it feels when you've allowed Christ into your heart.

**Fr. Jayme: Who are some of your favorite philosophers and theologians?**

Fr. Libardo: I have a great predilection for philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche, who fought or denied the existence of God. I loved reading Nietzsche's books, because I discovered in his works the strength of my faith.

The classics of Greek philosophy—Socrates and Plato—were the most delicious part of my seminary studies. I like the classics. In theology, I like Saint Augustine, a fearless man and a great thinker. I also enjoy John Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, Blaise Pascal, and Karl Rahner. I appreciate Saint Thomas Aquinas, a man of totally solid thought and with a great predisposition towards writing. While in Rome, I read his entire *Summa Theologica*. It was like entering a delicious sea of waters full of great wisdom, refreshing waters that solidified my faith, my way of thinking and acting, and my attitude toward giving one's self as a gift to others.

And, as a good Latin American, I've always liked the famous Dominican, Gustavo Gutierrez, with his delicious, little books of great substance. When liberation theology was in fashion, I also enjoyed the works of Leonardo Boff and of his brother, Clodovis Boff.

**Fr. Jayme: Tell us about your ministry in the Roman church. What were some of the greatest joys and challenges that you experienced as a Roman Catholic priest?**

Fr. Libardo: When you're ordained a priest, the first years of your ministry are a sort of "honeymoon." The first years are golden. They're years of happiness, despite everything you're going through: being in difficult parishes or being the vicar—the assistant—of very difficult pastors, some of whom even seem possessed and/or fit for mental institutions. You're happy, because you see the world through rose-colored lenses. Like married life, we soon discover that our lives are turning out very differently from what we had imagined. We soon begin to see the tremendous difficulties of the Roman Catholic Church.

As a Roman Catholic priest, I lived my entire priesthood in Rome. I was sent there immediately after I was ordained.

And despite my outgoing nature, I loved finding silence and solitude in Rome: places where I could study and meditate. I've always been a lover of prayer and contemplation, so I could spend hours and hours in front of the tabernacle, during nights of crisis, but also during nights of joy. It's something that I learned in the minor seminary: the joy of communicating with the great Communicator, and the joy of being before my Lord. Perhaps due to my own religious nature, I always enjoyed spending moments of contemplation alone in the churches I pastored. After reading a book, I would find some time to meditate on what I had read, spending a few moments of contemplation with the Lord, saying, "Fill my heart with you, Lord, because I belong to you!"

Rome gave me the opportunity to grow in my spirituality, the opportunity to spend a great amount of time with the Lord. I'm not the partying type, so I didn't associate with other priests all that much. In fact, I found many of them to live on their own "islands," isolated and afraid others would discover who they were or the double lives they were leading. I always respected my brother priests and their spirit of faithfulness. I always enjoyed a sense of fraternity with them and with my bishop. So, my 23 years in Rome weren't filled with great difficulties.

One thing that sometimes made me lose sleep was my desire to rebuild the churches I pastored: to restore years of damage and neglect, and to make them beautiful again. Those churches in Rome were centers of beauty, filled with art and all sorts of catechetical tools for those who contemplated them. So, I enjoyed making them places where people could feel comfortable, places where they could come and spend time with the Lord who never grows tired of waiting for us, the Lord who, from the tabernacle, says, to use the words of Saint Teresa, "I see you, and you see me!"

**Fr. Jayme: How was the experience of living in Italy for so many years?**

Fr. Libardo: Those years were fantastic, especially from a cultural point of view. I learned a lot about culture while I was there, and I had the opportunity to travel all over the world. Each year, I would organize a pilgrimage for those interested in art and archeology. We visited China and India, Russia and Turkey, Poland and Greece. We went to the Holy Land several times. We traveled to Fatima and Brazil and England, France, Germany, Holland, Belgium and Switzerland. We went everywhere, looking to learn about life and culture in those places. So, my years in Italy were extremely rich, from a cultural point of view, filled with many beautiful experiences.

I really had no difficulties in my 23 years of priestly ministry in Italy. I didn't even have difficulties with my parishioners, because I'm a very open person. I'm a person who respects others and who respects their ideas, even when I don't agree with them.

**Fr. Jayme: What perspective would you share on Independent Catholicism in the U.S.—especially of its strengths and weaknesses today?**

Fr. Libardo: This question is important, because it focuses on the present while also calling us to look toward the future. In 2015, a great priest opened to me the doors of the Independent Catholic Church, and, in the four years that I've lived here in the U.S., I've obtained a larger and more precise vision of the Church in the U.S. One beautiful experience that we enjoyed together was visiting the megachurches of Texas. In my observation, Americans are a very religious people. They are a people who are thirsting for God. They look for God. Unlike Italy, where the neighborhood church, with few exceptions, is always a Roman Catholic Church, every corner of the U.S. is filled with a variety of churches of different denominations. Here, you find four or five or six churches of different denominations, all in the same neighborhood. This tells me that the American people are a religious people. They're seeking God, all in different ways—but most importantly, they're seeking God. One opportunity of Independent

Catholicism in the U.S., then, is that we find ourselves surrounded by many sisters and brothers.

Independent Catholicism in the U.S., though, possesses an inherent weakness. You don't need a doctorate in psychology or sociology to immediately discover it. It's in the very name of "Independent Catholicism": It's our independence! Independent Catholic clergy develop their own small projects or parish communities, each in their own small "boats," with little, if any, consideration of the many other Independent Catholic "boats" around them—and without recognizing the great risk of being shipwrecked by the hurricanes and tsunamis of this world.

There is no unifying body for Independent Catholicism in the U.S. This is the great weakness that I've encountered in the movement—a movement in which many bishops don't even have parishes. What an irony: The episcopate is the fullness of the priesthood, and yet many bishops don't exercise their priesthood. They are pastors to no one. And so, there is no ecclesiology that is part of our theological reality, which, at its best, finds its maximum expression in the episcopate. To be a bishop is to be a pastor, but, if I don't have a community or a diocese, whose pastor am I? This is a great weakness of Independent Catholicism in the U.S.

Everyone lives on his/her own island, walled off from others in fear. We're like the community of disciples before the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost: Afraid and independent, many of us lack the confidence to go out into the world and proclaim who we are. But how is it possible to be a church when you're sealed off from others? The grimmest reality for a priest is to celebrate in an empty church—or worse, in an empty living room. Sure, the celebration is valid, and you're not alone, since, as Saint Thomas points out, Christ is with you. But, who are you sanctifying? If our mission is to go out to all the world and preach the good news (Mt. 28:19), this is the great weakness of Independent Catholicism in the U.S. It's a subject that's worthy of an entire book.

My own small reflection here on U.S. Independent Catholicism is only “the tip of the iceberg.” I pray that we might all reflect on the reality we’re living, so that together, with the grace of God, we might improve it. With God, all things are possible (Mt. 19:26)!

**Fr. Jayme: What are some of the greatest opportunity and threats faced by Independent Catholicism in the U.S. today?**

Fr. Libardo: The U.S. is and always has been a country of immigrants. And immigrants possess great power. When they come to our nation and to our churches, immigrants don’t come alone. They bring the dreams they hold in their hearts. All of us who come to the U.S. carry a dream inside us. And for those of us who minister to immigrants, there are many opportunities to share in the education and formation of our sisters and brothers from other nations. In the solitude of their homes and mobile homes, immigrants often feel they have no place to go. We provide an oasis for them.

This creates an opportunity for us: to open the doors of our churches and to re-create the famous ecclesial base communities of the liberation theology movement of the 1960’s and 1970’s – small, grassroots ecclesial communities that provide a home for the lonely, lost, and wounded who find themselves here in the great jungle of the U.S. They’re struggling to learn the language and to find the resources they need. Let’s open the doors of our churches to them! This has created a tremendous opportunity to us here at Holy Family Catholic Church in Austin. Most immigrants to the U.S. are Christian, so, if you believe in Christ, and if I’m able to preach Christ to you, you will encounter the Christ who is found in each one of us and in our service to one another. It’s a tremendous opportunity for Independent Catholicism in the U.S., if only we embrace that reality.

The threats that surround us are also real. The Roman Catholic Church in the U.S. is undergoing a metamorphosis, and it continues to lean toward the most conservative voices in its midst. With the notable scandal of its priests and ministers, and its subsequent loss of authority, the Roman Catholic Church of the U.S. is closing in on itself. And the more conservative and traditionalist

that the Roman church becomes, the more of a threat we will seem to them – with our openness to married priests and to the priesthood of women, and our inclusive love for all of God’s children. With its recalcitrant traditionalism, the highly-armed Roman church will certainly paint us as “outsiders,” perhaps even disingenuously suggesting – while knowing that their claims are ridiculous – that our sacraments aren’t valid or that they don’t generate salvation. This is a real threat, worthy of our consideration. Their sheer size and the fact that they share our name – Catholic – makes them a force with which we must contend. How sad that we have “enemies” within our own Catholic tradition. But, “do not be afraid” (Lk. 1:30). “Peter, do you love me?” “Feed my lambs.” “Peter, do you love me?” “Tend my sheep” (Jn. 21: 15-19). The love of Christ impels us, and the love of Christ implies suffering and the cross, but not without the certainty of a future resurrection. Therefore, with the pastoral attitude of flinging open the doors of our churches, let’s not be afraid.

At the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis famously said that the Church is called to be a field hospital. What a beautiful image! Here in this “field hospital” of Independent Catholicism, we can’t be afraid of those who are ill. We can’t be afraid to reach out to one another. We can’t be afraid to open our hearts and our doors to one another and to share our lives with one another, instead of locking ourselves inside our churches and our sacristies. So, even knowing the challenges, particularly that of an increasingly-conservative and right-leaning Roman church, let us fearlessly open our doors. “I will be with you until the end of time,” says the Lord (Mt. 28:20). Let us therefore continue with our mission, knowing that the Lord will never abandon us.

**Fr. Jayme: What perspective might you share on the multiplicity of bishops within U.S. Independent Catholicism – especially on the large number of shepherds who care for relatively few sheep?**

Fr. Libardo: During a recent lunch with my very intelligent and very insightful American brother-priest, I shared, “Americans seem to have the vocation of the episcopacy.” Yes,

Americans seemed to feel called to be bishops, more so than Europeans—and much more so than Latin Americans. In Italy, where I enjoyed 23 years of my priestly ministry, the Apostolic Nunciature had difficulty finding bishops for the dioceses of Italy. No one wanted to be a bishop. The same happens in Latin America, where it seems very few priests have the vocation to be a bishop. The great responsibility of being a bishop is not negligible. A Dominican professor at a university in Rome once said, “In Latin America, they make you a bishop, and they give you a miter, so that people can see that you’re a bishop, and they give you a collection basket to collect money, which often comes from the poorest of the community. And you, being a shepherd, cannot be indifferent to the poverty of your clergy, your churches, and the people who have been entrusted to you by God’s grace.” So, in Latin America, priests are afraid of being bishops. They’re afraid of being shepherds. And when Rome asks you “Would you like to be a bishop?”, you refuse. You say, “I don’t have the health for that,” or “I don’t have the skills for that,” or “I think others would be better suited for that than me.”

In contrast, there are bishops everywhere in the U.S. Here in the U.S., you have bishops of all colors and flavors. It seems this could be the fruit of a religious people and of a very religious clergy. It could also be a sign of individuals who love titles and top positions, who love dressing up and feeling important.

The question arises: How can we explain so many shepherds caring for so few sheep? And how do we explain so many shepherds who have no sheep at all, much less the theological preparation to care for sheep, if they ever were to have them at all?

This is a serious issue, perhaps even the sign of a pathology in the Independent Catholic movement in the U.S. Being aware of the disease, however, can help us prevent allowing it to infect us—and perhaps even help us to find an antidote to neutralize the threat that, in most cases, is not bearing good fruit. What is the point of being a bishop over a small group of priests? Worse yet, what is the point of being a bishop with no priests? God willing, we might

hear how it is that God is knocking on the doors of our hearts and calling us to neutralize this pathology.

**Fr. Jayme: Knowing that apostolic succession was important to the Church of Utrecht in 1724, how important is apostolic succession within Independent Catholicism today? And how are we to understand the phenomenon of Independent Catholic bishops so easily receiving and sharing apostolic succession?**

Fr. Libardo: This question of apostolic succession deserves a separate chapter, perhaps even a deep, serious study, because apostolic succession means everything in the Roman Catholic Church, which claims a certain predominance and monopoly as a result. In the view of the Roman church, where there is no apostolic succession, there is no validity of the sacraments that are celebrated. And if there is no validity in the sacraments that are celebrated, there is no salvation. There is no grace. The sacraments of the Church generate the grace of salvation.

Indeed, the topic deserves more than a chapter. I challenge the readers of this work to collaborate in publishing a book on this topic, so that we might articulate well the arguments regarding apostolic succession, based in scripture and substantiated by tradition and theology. I recall a professor of church history at a pontifical university in Rome, who said that we fall prey to thinking that apostolic succession is linear, that it's something that's been handed down since the foundation of the Church: that Christ consecrated the apostles as "bishops," who in turn consecrated other "bishops," who in turn consecrated other "bishops," extending the grace of Christ to the present day. This professor pointed out that, in the same way that the Church never gave a clear explanation of limbo, which was deleted with a single stroke in the new catechism of the Roman church, the Church has never clearly articulated its reasoning on apostolic succession.

The matter deserves our attention and serious reflection since, without valid lines of apostolic succession, we are susceptible to attacks that our sacraments do not generate the effects of grace. Without apostolic succession, we are "sects," we are "fake priests," and we lack the ability to

celebrate the sacraments of the Church. So, let's write a book on this together, based on all the documentation on the matter that exists in the Roman Catholic Church, so that we can speak knowledgeably on the matter and defend ourselves, and so that we can speak about how it is that apostolic succession is the soul of the sacrament of Holy Orders, uniting all the other sacraments of the Church.

The issue of apostolic succession is especially problematic in the Independent Catholic Church in the U.S., since it's difficult to ascertain who possesses valid lines of apostolic succession. The same challenge occurred in 16<sup>th</sup>-century England, when Henry VIII separated from the Roman church and imprisoned and/or beheaded the bishops who disagreed with him. This naturally raised the question of whether the bishops of the Anglican Catholic Church possessed apostolic succession after such a holocaust, after so many had died and it was no longer clear whether those who succeeded them were validly ordained and/or consecrated and enjoyed valid lines of apostolic succession.

But the challenge is larger than the Anglican Church: Not even the Roman Catholic Church, according to that professor of Church history – who is now a bishop – can be certain that it possesses true apostolic succession, tracing all the way back to Christ and the apostles.

Within U.S. Independent Catholicism, the appeal for valid lines of apostolic succession is usually traced to an old bishop, archbishop or cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church, like Carlos Duarte Costa, a Roman Catholic bishop in Brazil, or Emmanuel Milingo, the Roman Catholic archbishop of Lusaka, Zambia. Duarte Costa and Milingo have the gift of ubiquity: They seem to be “present” at every consecration, even if only in spirit, because everyone wants to appeal to their valid and uncontestable lines of apostolic succession. Every Independent Catholic bishop wants to say, “I’m a real bishop, and the sacraments I celebrate generate the grace of salvation.” It’s a way for us to justify our priestly and pastoral instincts, and for bishops to say, “For all intents

and purposes, I am a bishop, a representative of Christ through one of the apostles whom he called when he came down to earth and became flesh in Mary's womb."

How tremendous it would be for the U.S. Independent Catholic Church to have such good and serious literature on such topics as apostolic succession. Those of us who were ordained in the Roman Catholic Church don't have to wrestle with this issue in the same way, since our sacraments are inarguably valid, but our sisters and brothers ordained outside the Roman church will still be asked, "Who ordained you a priest?" For their sake, let's publish a work that leaves no doubt that they, too, validly share the sacraments of the Church with God's people.

To be clear, I don't tend to question the ordination of priests or the consecration of bishops. Such judgments tend to separate clergy into categories of a first-class clergy, those whose sacraments are not questioned, and a second-class clergy, those whose sacraments carry, for some, a question mark of doubt, since it is unclear whether the bishop who ordained and/or consecrated them shared with them lines of apostolic succession. This distinction isn't right. Far from being Christian, it seems cruel and inhumane to question the validity of another priest or bishop of good will. Charity and fraternity, it seems, are the Christian response.

**Fr. Jayme:** **What name should we use of ourselves? Are we really "Old Catholics," as the churches of the Utrecht Union are? Would it be better to call ourselves "Independent Catholics"? Or "Separated Catholics," as you often refer to Independent Catholics in Spanish? Or, Catholics of the Apostolic Succession? Or, is there a better name that we might use of ourselves?**

Fr. Libardo: Names are important. Philosophically speaking, they allow us to identify persons and elements. In order to know something, you have to give it a name, and, by giving it a name, you bestow being on it.

Here in Austin, many of us are children of our "mother," the Roman Catholic Church. We were born into and we

come from the Roman Catholic Church—and it would be a mistake not to recognize this historical reality.

That is why I prefer to say that we are “Independent Catholics” or *católicos separados*—“Separated Catholics,” in Spanish—even knowing that with this, the questions arises: “Independent from whom?” Or, “Separated from whom?” The obvious answer is that we are independent of and/or separated from the Roman Catholic Church, the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht, or another Catholic church. I wouldn’t say that I’m “independent” if I were born from nowhere. The very word “independent” clearly implies that we were born from other churches. We have a mother, from whom we are now independent. And we have our own identity. We are not the mother. Saint Thomas tells us, “The effect cannot be the same as the cause.” In our case, our mother is and always will be our mother. Here in Austin, we are a daughter of the Roman Catholic Church. There are things on which we disagree with our mother, and so we now exist independently of her, configuring our own reality, particularly with respect to our own liturgical and pastoral behavior.

Paraphrasing the Trinitarian theology of Saint Augustine, we might say that the Daughter is not the Mother, but is consubstantial with—of the same matter and participating in the same divinity as—the Mother. By analogy, we might say that the Independent Catholic Church is not the Roman Catholic Church, but is of the same substance. And, being of the same substance, we live our Catholicism in the mode or manner of Independent Catholicism.

What does it mean to say we are of the same substance as the Roman church? We are united by the indispensable sacrament of Baptism. Not even the great Martin Luther would deny the sacramentality of baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. We are Catholic by virtue of the baptism we all share, but while some people are Catholic in the Roman Catholic way, we are Catholic in the Independent Catholic way. Theologically, we are part of the Catholic Church in the mode or manner of Independent Catholicism.

I don't think it's possible for us to call ourselves "Old Catholics," as our sisters and brothers of the Union of Utrecht do. This creates confusion. It would be like calling ourselves Roman Catholic, when we really aren't. Also, there seems to be a theological error in referring to oneself as an "old" church. As the Body of Christ, which never grows old, the Church does not age. The Body of Christ is divine, and, according to dogmatic theology, one of the divine attributes is never-aging beauty. What precisely does it mean to be an "Old Catholic" or an "Old Catholic Church"? The Body of Christ is not "old." The Body of Christ is alpha and omega, beginning and end (Apoc. 1.8). It supersedes time and space.

Adorning churches with nationalistic or patriotic epithets also strikes me as reducing the beacon of light that a church might share with our world. For several years here in Austin, for instance, we self-identified as part of the American Catholic Church in the United States (ACCUS). But can you correctly refer to a church as "American Catholic"? "Catholic" means universal. Why would anyone reduce the field of action, from the universal to a particular? It seems a contradiction and a theological error to say that something is both "universal" and "American" in the same breath—unless someone is able to explain to me the passage from the universal to the particular, and how it is that we can reduce the universal, to the vision of a single nation.

**Fr. Jayme: What perspective would you share on the diversity of priests and deacons in U.S. Independent Catholicism, who range from the most conservative, to those who follow the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, to those who are more "New Age"?**

Fr. Libardo: The diversity of Independent Catholic clergy doesn't bother me. Nor does it impress me. The Roman Catholic Church also contains a very diverse clergy, ranging from very traditional priests, to very liberal priests. This is another matter that might demand deeper study and more serious reflection. Love accepts all, forgives all, and is not false or hypocritical (1Cor. 13,4-5). Love accepts people for who they are. The thirteenth chapter of Paul's letter to the

Corinthians provides food for thought, challenging us to apply to our own daily lives those words that we so easily preach but less easily live.

Some priests are liberal, and others are conservative. Some wear cassocks, and others don't. Some celebrate Mass in one way, and others celebrate it in another way. How do we respond in love to such diversity? Do we accept the other as s/he is, or not? Do we accept our sister- and brother-priests, or not, without distinguishing between their manner of dress or of celebrating the sacraments? Do we love and accept them, regardless of their gender or sexual orientation? Ultimately, the question for each of us is: Will we be like Christ, who is love, and will we live that love with all our sisters and brothers?

Catholicism is a rainbow – and the rainbow is not a single color. The rainbow is comprised of several colors. So, in the “rainbow” of Catholicism, one person is “red,” another is “green,” and another is “blue,” but together we configure the beauty of a single rainbow. It's an absolutely beautiful phenomenon!

**Fr. Jayme: Independent Catholicism is different from the Roman church in that it doesn't have excessive requirements for the sacraments of the Church. What risks exist for the Independent Catholic movement if we fail to share a solid theological formation with all candidates for the diaconate, priesthood and episcopate?**

Fr. Libardo: To be clear, there are Independent Catholic groups that possess a great concern for the formation—especially for the theological formation—of their priests, with requirements that are more-or-less similar to those of the Roman Catholic Church. Moreover, I know an Independent Catholic bishop in California who says that he has no need to ordain priests, because all his priests have come from the Roman Catholic Church, already possessing a solid formation.

It's also necessary to point out that many of the Church's requirements for sacraments are not biblical—like the requirement that godparents be married. It borders on the ridiculous to suggest that godparents, if married, must be

married by the Church. It also seems cruel. Could a person really imply that, just because a godmother is not married by the Church, she is not able to assume the responsibility of being a godparent? Such an assertion would be both ridiculous and cruel. Our faith doesn't depend on the marriage of our godparents—but on the grace generated by the sacrament itself. The Church's intent is to ensure that godparents are representatives who can, to some extent, preserve the faith in the candidate for the sacrament. I return to the words of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: "Humankind is good by nature, but is corrupted by society."

In some respects, we've become Pharisees, and it's time to lighten the burden we place on people. We are experts at rules, and we are experts when it comes to imposing heavy burdens on others. "You can't be confirmed if you don't complete two (or three) years of preparation!" "They can't be married if they don't do six months of preparation!" "He can't receive his First Communion; he's only gone to classes for one and a half years!" Puh-lease. In the name of religion, we become hypocrites when we say such things.

Certainly, there's nothing wrong with a solid preparation, especially when it comes to the sacrament of Holy Orders. In my experience, priests with more theological preparation are more faithful, more open to communion with others, and more respectful of who they are and what they're celebrating. And to the extent to which my theological preparation allows me to live in communion, charity and respect with my sister- and brother-priests, allowing us to configure a presbyteral body, I'm less likely to betray, speak ill of, or poison them.

It's also imaginable that there are some persons, particularly within the Independent Catholic tradition, who want to become priests or bishops simply for the "privilege" and "prestige." This is a problem we cannot ignore. I suggest that this tendency is like a silent, effective moth, which, being a parasite, damages wood and turns it to dust. I am the wood, and, if I don't possess the solid "varnish" of the necessary knowledge and skills to exercise

my priesthood, this “moth” might enter and turn my priesthood to dust.

By no means am I suggesting that all priests must have the fine theological, philosophical and spiritual preparation that priests of the Roman Catholic Church possess. That would be a lie. I merely suggest that if we share the sacrament of Holy Orders with those who lack the necessary formation for it, we create a two-tiered clergy of first-class and second-class priests. This damages communion, as it keeps us from seeing ourselves as part of Christ’s “discipleship of equals.” The Roman Catholic Church lived this in the Middle Ages, when it had a system of high clergy – the princes who aspired to such offices as bishop, abbot, cardinal or pope – and the low clergy, who had very little intellectual preparation. God forbid that such a caste system should ever characterize Independent Catholicism in the U.S., since it would be detrimental to our unity as members of the mystical Body of Christ.

**Fr. Jayme: What perspective would you share on Independent Catholic laity in the U.S. – those who’ve found a spiritual home and community with us, even if many of them might view us, to use your words, as a “seaport” where they land from time to time – sometimes merely to receive the sacraments of the Church?**

Fr. Libardo: I’m fond of the image of the “port,” which is worth more than a thousand words. Many of the laity who are part of our community here in Austin are or were part of the Roman Catholic Church. Naturally, they come to us with questions of faith, religion, catechesis, and even theological matters: “Who are you, Father?” “Is the Roman Catholic bishop of Austin your bishop?” What is my response as a priest? To tell the truth, of course! I want people to know that I am an Independent Catholic priest. It’s part of my identity. Besides, by not being totally honest in this respect, we risk confusing people, or having them believe that we’re Roman Catholic, when we’re not. Yes, it’s cruel for others – particularly our brothers of the Roman Catholic clergy – to disingenuously suggest that our sacraments are not valid. It also seems cruel to allow people to entrust themselves to our pastoral care without knowing that we

are Independent Catholic clergy and that we are part of the Independent Catholic Church. It's a trap into which we might fall as priests, not identifying ourselves as part of the Independent Catholic Church. Imagine a layperson discovering that you are not part of the Roman Catholic clergy of the place where your community is located, and asking, "Why didn't you tell me you're Independent Catholic? And why didn't you explain to me the difference between Roman Catholicism and Independent Catholicism? I'm Roman Catholic, and I'm going back to my Roman Catholic Church!" How would you feel in front of such a person? And how would your conscience feel? The truth will set us free (Jn. 8:32), and, when we free people through the truth, we will be able to bring more people closer to God.

We should not be ashamed of who we are. In the Mexican culture, what child is ashamed of his or her mother? And what mother is ashamed of her children? I find that people are often quite willing to share family photos; such photos speak of the unity of their family. And people tell us with great pride: "She's my daughter." "He's my son." "She's my daughter-in-law." "He's my brother-in-law." "He's my daughter's husband." "She's my son's wife." There's a desire for the whole family to be known, with great pride and without any difficulty. Everyone has the right to know that we are Independent Catholics, that we don't depend on Rome for our catholicity, but that our sacraments are valid and generate the grace of salvation that Christ brought to this earth.

If I were to ever have my own parish, the sign outside would read, "Independent Catholic Church." This would make clear that we're not part of the "boat" of the Roman church, but that we are part of the Independent Catholic Church, which is also a church, is also Catholic by virtue of baptism, and also generates salvation.

I like to say that here, at Holy Family, we're like a seaport, where ships come and go. We're a safe harbor for those who've been discriminated against by our mother church. People come to us because of all the requirements that our mother demands of them, leaving them feeling helpless.

They feel it's impossible to celebrate the baptism of their child or grandchild, because there are so many obstacles to overcome. And they leave feeling crushed. We are an alternative, welcoming them for the sacraments of the Church, and sending them on their way. But if we prepare them well, and if we touch their hearts and offer them a glimpse of Christ, who is the same Christ of the entire Catholic Church, perhaps that person will stay with us for a time and become part of our family. Perhaps that person will even find a home with us, and be a child of God with us, and strive for salvation with us. Yes, we are a port, and people come to us from all over. I like that image.

Or, you might say that Independent Catholicism is a flower, where the hummingbirds and bees are nourished. They come to us hungry, they find in us the nectar they're looking for, and, being nourished by us, perhaps they'll return for more. The only hesitation I have in using the image of the flower is that flowers are so fragile. Let's not be "flowers." Let's form solid communities that we might label "parishes," linking ourselves to other communities and parishes, even forming what canon law refers to as a "diocese."

In my experience here in the U.S., Americans possess a real sense of belonging. They are more engaged in their churches. They become a parish, a community, a human reality that is also divine: the mystical Body of Christ! They consider themselves members or parishioners. They feel the need to be with others, to identify with others, and to share with others. So, for some, we are a port, and, for others, we are a real community of faith.

**Fr. Jayme: What would you say to the bishops, priests, deacons and lay persons who are trying to grow their eucharistic communities?**

Fr. Libardo: Be shepherds. Don't be afraid of your sisters and brothers in Christ. Open your hearts and your doors. Be your authentic selves. Be people of intense spirituality, since great spirituality is required in the building of true community. Give the best you have to your sisters and brothers. And what is the best you have? Being authentic in Christ, bringing joy to the hearts of others in a world sick

with depression and in a society that often prefers to escape the true reality that is lived by human beings, where, even though we're connected by technology and mass media, we feel more alone than ever—in our “bubbles,” surrounded by loneliness. In such a world, bishops, priests and deacons must be mothers and fathers, teachers and pastors. They must be Christ for others. And people will recognize this. They'll approach us, looking for a word of hope. Remember: By our fruits, they will know us (Mt. 7:16). The first Christian community endured several trials, including martyrdom, but they carried on in love and fellowship—and that's what many people are looking for today. So, to all bishops who enjoy dressing as bishops and expressing their episcopality within their sacred walls, I say: “Open the doors of your hearts, and be the pastors and teachers you are called to be!”

**Fr. Jayme: What's your opinion the ecumenism of U.S. Independent Catholicism? How open or not should we be to other clergy who self-identify as “Old Catholics” and/or Independent Catholics?**

Fr. Libardo: The word “ecumenism” means “openness.” I've always loved that word. And I'm heartened to see the Roman Catholic Church's recent openness to ecumenism, as expressed in its dialogues with the Anglican Church and in the pope's recent opening of a “window” to our Lutheran sisters and brothers.

The Independent Catholic Church in the U.S.—if it can be considered a single church—has a problem: It is splintered into too many groups. It is fragmented. And, from the perspective of Rome, it is practically unseen and insignificant. The U.S. is a sea filled with so many churches, so many groups, so many trends and colors and flavors. Why would we not open our hearts and build bridges with other people of good will? Why would we not listen to and dialogue with one another? Why would we not share our experiences with one another?

In my opinion, based on the few years I've been here in the U.S., we have a long row to hoe with respect to ecumenism. As we say in Spanish, we have a lot of cloth to cut. As an

Independent Catholic Church, let's get to work. Let's open ourselves, get to know those around us, and build bridges.

One day, I hope to more deeply explore the theology of the "bridges" that might help unite the many "islands" in our tradition. In the meantime, I believe that ecumenism is important to the Independent Catholic Church in the U.S. It's necessary. And it's worth it. There's no other alternative. So, let's open ourselves to others, to dialogue, and to the possibility of living in communion with others.

**Fr. Jayme: How realistic is the idea of one day achieving union between Independent Catholicism and the Roman church?**

Fr. Libardo: That's the "million-dollar question," as we say in Italian. The Roman Catholic Church has yet to achieve union with the Orthodox Church, after the schism that split the East from the West in 1054 A.D. So, how realistic is it to think that we'll achieve union with Rome? Such a possibility is light years away! I like to talk about bridges, but such a union would involve the largest possible viaduct in the history of humanity. But neither is it impossible. Everything is possible with the grace of God (Mt. 19:26). And God's perception of time is very different from ours. For God, two-thousand years is like a day that has passed (Ps. 90:4). We might live in the hope of such a reunion, of being welcomed back home (Lk. 15:20-24), but that path home is not well illuminated. It's difficult to see the path that leads to the ideal unification of all churches, to configure the mystical Body of Christ as a single church.

**Fr. Jayme: There are purportedly more than six million Filipinos in the Independent Church of the Philippines. What might we learn from them?**

Fr. Libardo: As Independent Catholics in the U.S., we need to build a "bridge" to the Philippines! Six-million Independent Catholics in a single nation: That's significant. It's a number worth considering. Hearing such a number—six million—challenges us here in the U.S.: We don't have clear statistics in the U.S. regarding the number of persons who self-identify as Independent Catholic. But six million is a lot of sisters and brothers to open your doors to!

What a beautiful cultural exchange it would be – between our sisters and brothers of the Independent Church of the Philippines and the U.S. Independent Catholic Church. We should plan an experience with them. We should enter into dialogue with them. We should learn about their reality: how they live, their dreams and aspirations, the challenges they've experienced, their history, and the reasons the Independent Church of the Philippines came to be. Let's enter into dialogue with them. Let's exchange clergy with them. Let's spend time with them. Let's visit the Philippines, and let's invite them here. It could be a very beautiful and uplifting experience for the Independent Catholic Church in the U.S.!

**Fr. Jayme: What's your opinion on the innovative Roman "dogmas" of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of Mary, and also of the universal jurisdiction of the pope?**

Fr. Libardo: Dogmas are a tool that the Roman Catholic Church uses to teach and catechize, and to highlight self-evident truths that have been considered axioms in the course of Church history. Throughout its history, the Roman Catholic Church has learned a lot. And, in its great wisdom, the Roman church knows perfectly well that such dogmas provide identity and shared beliefs, ideally uniting people.

The Roman church's dogmas on Mary have wisely been used to make up for the absence of women in the bosom of the church: in its administration and its liturgy. The image of Mary is lifted up – which is not entirely bad, since Mary is the mother of God, the *theotokos*, and she occupies an important place in the church as co-redeemer. But, in the process, our sisters are brushed aside.

What perspective should we, in the Independent Catholic Church, have of such dogmas? Personally, the Roman church's elevation of Mary to co-redeemer doesn't bother me. She is the mother of God. She is part of a theological reality we cannot deny. She participates in the beatific vision and intercedes for us to her Son, whom she carried in her womb and whom she shared with humanity. She is important for the Church, and I'm not troubled by the idea of her Immaculate Conception. It doesn't hurt to have a mother in heaven, to aid us on our pilgrimage here on

earth, and to intercede for us to the Father, with the Son, and in the Holy Spirit—since Mary is the spouse of the Holy Spirit.

The universal jurisdiction of the pope, though, is more problematic. It's an issue that creates difficulty for ecumenism, particularly with respect to communion between the church of Rome and the Orthodox Catholic Church and the churches of the east.

I've always viewed the pope as a brother among brothers, but the literature on the matter is extensive, and it's a worthwhile topic for discussion.

When he began his pontificate, Pope Francis said, "I am the bishop of Rome." This seemed an important step for ecumenism, but, with the ambiguous behavior of this pope, who is white today, gray tomorrow, and black the next day, being "the bishop of Rome" is not a line that he's stuck to. His initial self-identity as "the bishop of Rome" has been lost in the dark, wintry clouds of the Eternal City, which have clouded the thoughts of more than a few great leaders of the church of Rome.

**Fr. Jayme:** **Knowing that the question was raised with *Unigenitus* of how much we should obey the pope versus how much we should obey our own conscience, how would you resolve that apparent dichotomy?**

Fr. Libardo: Obedience is a reality in any organization or system. In every pyramidal structure, there are the persons who give commands, and the persons who must comply. So, obedience, to some extent, is necessary for any organization to function.

But "blind obedience" is another matter. The medieval maxim, "those who obey will never go wrong," is obviously mistaken. We cannot and should not obey principles or norms that go against our conscience.

We must be clear about the purpose of obedience, who we obey, and why we obey them. In Independent Catholicism, we have the same structure as the Roman Catholic Church, of "older brother" bishops. In many ways, we speak the same language, with words like "superior," "rector" and

“teacher.” So, we recognize, in a spirit of humility, that obeying our rector, our teacher, our pastor, or our bishop—our “superior” in whose care the Lord has placed us—is not a terrible thing when that person is a person of God, filled with God’s grace, and living in communion with others. Then, his/her “orders” are filled with goodness, love and a spirit of communion.

Our conscience is the voice of God, speaking to each of us, but it must also be formed and informed with clear principles that lead to the light of good human behavior. So, personally, I don’t see a contradiction with respect to obedience.

**Fr. Jayme: Knowing that the Roman church has excommunicated—or excluded from communion—those who have been divorced and are now remarried outside the Church, what would you say to those who, as we say in Spanish, are “living in sin”?**

Fr. Libardo: This was one of the hot topics discussed at the First Synod on the Family in 2015. And the synod was a total failure, which is why Pope Francis stayed the course and called the Second Synod on the Family—in an attempt to convince cardinals that the doors of Holy Mother Church should be opened to the divorced. The alternative is considering them “excommunicated” or as living in mortal sin—but living in mortal sin means that they are purportedly condemned to hell!

If such a matter is being discussed at the highest levels of the Roman church, with even the pope feeling the need to talk about the issue, we, too, have an obligation to provide an answer to this question. My answer is this: Who are we to condemn others? We are called to open our hearts and to be the heart of Jesus, mercifully bringing others into the fold (Jn. 10:1). We are not called to condemn others to the fires of hell.

Pope Francis seemed enlightened on this issue, but after the great confusion of the First and Second Synods on the Family, Pope Francis has remained silent on the issue. As I’ve said before, he’s a great man, but he’s also extremely

ambiguous, leaving people to wonder what they should believe on such issues.

I'm always pleased to speak with divorced people and to tell them that, in the Independent Catholic Church, our doors are open to them. We are called to be the hands of Christ, reaching out to all people—including the divorced—and mercifully extending to them the invitation to be nourished by the Body of Christ, which is for sinners and not for saints.

**Fr. Jayme: What do you think of the ordination of men who are married and/or divorced?**

Fr. Libardo: We're at the beginning of a Copernican revolution on this question. During the first week of October, the pan-Amazonian Synod was celebrated in Rome, with many cardinals being opposed to the idea of married Roman Catholic priests. I just read an interesting article on how a prayer vigil was created, asking the Spirit to enlighten the synod fathers who see celibacy as a divine gift and are against the priesthood of married men. How different this is from the first thousand years of Church history, when Catholic priests could be married! For more than a thousand years, celibacy was not a "divine gift"—and the Orthodox Church continues to share that perspective today, allowing married men to serve as priests and bishops. Is there anything wrong with this? There's certainly no contradiction in the sacrament of marriage: God created us to be together, to be one, as the anthropology of the book of Genesis makes clear (Gen. 2:24).

So, what's the problem? Why is the idea of married priests so scandalous to some? In the course of Church history, we have not tired of saying that marriage is a sacrament that sanctifies; are we suggesting that priests cannot sanctify themselves in marriage? Are we claiming that priests must give their lives to the Church, without sharing their lives with another person?

This is hardly a dogma of our faith. Nor is it found anywhere in scripture. Sure, there's a famous passage that has been interpreted in many ways: "There are eunuchs

who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 19:12). But these words should certainly not be taken to mean that, in the course of the history of the Church, it is a *sine qua non* that one must be celibate in order to be a priest. Were we wrong on this issue for the first 1,000 years of Church history? Were those who led the Church during that time wrong? Was Christ wrong when he chose Peter, who was married (Lk. 4:38-40)?

Far too many people are far too closeminded on this issue. Married people can exercise pastoral ministry in the name of God and in the name of the Church, without any difficulty at all. We find married clergy not only in the Orthodox Church, which continues this praxis, but also in the Anglican Church, the Episcopal Church, and in evangelical churches, where married clergy share their ministry without any difficulty. There is a great amount of literature on the subject, and the only thesis in support of a celibate priesthood is that we should be like Christ, who, according to some, was presumed to be celibate. Just because Christ is divine, doesn't mean that we are divine. Nor does it logically follow that, just because Christ is thought by some to have been celibate, all priests must therefore be celibate.

And the ordination of those who are divorced? The words of Pope Francis come back to mind: When he was returning from Brazil, he was asked about those who are gay, and his response was, "Who am I to judge?" I say the same: Who am I to judge? There are divorced men who are far holier than "celibate" priests. It is God who scrutinizes the hearts of all (Rom. 8:27), enlightening them, and equipping them for mission and ministry. Why would we close the door to so many divorced people who, living in holiness and justice before God and before their sisters and brothers, might be tremendous priests? I certainly don't judge or exclude them. I would never pretend to be a judge in matters that only God can judge.

**Fr. Jayme: What do you think about the ordination of women? And how might we rise above the prejudices that contribute to the inequality that exists between women and men in our world and in the Church?**

Fr. Libardo: This is certainly another hot issue in the Church. In 2015, Pope Francis renewed talk of the priesthood of women when he named a theological commission to study the possibility of deaconesses in the Roman church. The Roman church's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith concluded that the Roman church has no authority to share the priesthood with women, because "that's the way Christ wanted it." Obviously, the Roman church is the *only* church that shares this view and is radically opposed to the inclusion of women in ordained ministry.

The matter is worthy of a doctoral dissertation on sacramental theology. Pope John Paul II shut down conversation on the subject, saying that the ordination of women was impossible. How interesting it is to note that the ordination of women has not been deemed impossible by so many other churches. The Anglican Church, which was the first to open its doors to the priesthood of women, has no difficulty in accepting this reality.

With respect to the sacrament of Holy Orders, many of us in the Independent Catholic Church share beliefs that distinguish us from the Roman Catholic Church: We admit women to the sacrament of Holy Orders, and we believe in equality between women and men—for the sacrament of Holy Orders, but also in society and in the Church.

While this is yet another topic worthy of further exploration, we know that there are countless reasons to suggest that there is no difficulty at all in sharing the sacrament of Holy Orders with women.

**Fr. Jayme: What do you think about liberation theology—including feminist liberation theology and/or Latin American liberation theology?**

Fr. Libardo: In the seminary, I grew up reading the liberation theology of Leonardo Boff and Gustavo Gutierrez. Sure, there are elements in liberation theology that are upsetting to and cause dissonance with some Catholics. But liberation

theology is, at its roots, the result of a suffering people, of people so poor that it's difficult for them, in their misery, to see the face of Christ in the Church. Instead, they see the face of Christ in the children who are starving to death in the streets and *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, or in the children who suffer drug addiction in Bogotá, Colombia, or in Quito, Ecuador, or in Lima, Peru. Liberation theology is the result of the crushing poverty suffered by the extremely religious people of Latin American, who have been referred to as the hope of the Roman Catholic Church.

Liberation theology is a grassroots theology, a "theology from below." It's a theology of the people, a theology of the poor, a theology of those who are unable to sing of God's glory in a church because their stomachs are empty and they don't even enjoy the "daily bread" for which they pray. Liberation theology is the cry of a poor people, a people so marginalized by poverty that they seek only to be held in the heart of the suffering Christ. They pray for liberation—and that's why we call it "liberation theology." All theology should be liberation theology. All theology should liberate humanity from all that holds it bound, so that we might raise our hands to Christ our redeemer, to Christ our savior, to Christ our liberator!

Latin American liberation theologians were persecuted and silenced by the Roman church—which is why I was impressed to hear that Gustavo Gutierrez, the famous founder of the liberation theology movement, was recently invited by Pope Francis to share a lecture at the Vatican. It was a moment in which the pope's pendulum seemed to swing to the left. Gustavo Gutierrez is a great intellectual, with "thick skin." I sometimes wonder why he wasn't excommunicated or reduced to the lay state by the very conservative voices that led the Roman church at that time.

With respect to feminist theology, I'll be honest: While I have a great amount of respect for the movement of feminist liberation theology, I also don't know a lot about it. This movement is obviously less strong in Rome. I wouldn't want to disrespect this theological reality by pretending to know more about feminist theology than I do.

**Fr. Jayme:** In many places, Independent Catholicism is more open to those who self-identify as gay and/or as part of the LGBTQIA+ community. Why is that? And why does the Roman church have such strict stances on homosexuality when its celibate priesthood has been a viable alternative for so many gay men in the world?

Fr. Libardo: This question is music to my ears. I've found Independent Catholicism to be much more open and merciful to all people, including those who live this reality.

The issue of homosexuality was never openly discussed in Rome until Pope Francis shared his now-famous question while returning from Brazil: "Who am I to judge?" In the Middle Ages, there was a pope, Nicholas V, who handed gay priests over to be burned at the stake by civil authorities. In his estimation, such priests were sick or possessed, or were sinners with no possibility of being saved. But after that, the issue of homosexuality (or "sodomy") in the Roman church was hardly a topic of conversation until the clergy sexual abuse scandal in the early 2000's.

French journalist Frédéric Martel recently published a book, *In the Closet of the Vatican*, which explores the humanity and sexuality of many members of the Holy See. And we have to ask ourselves: Are we really surprised to learn that most of the members of the Roman church's bureaucracy are gay and that they haven't lived the life of celibacy and chastity that they profess?

It seems so hypocritical that Pope Francis, the man who said, "Who am I to judge?", would later pen a letter to his bishops and to the rectors of all Roman Catholic seminaries to forbid those who are openly gay from being ordained to the priesthood. As I've suggested, what Pope Francis writes with one hand, he erases with the other! By the afternoon, he's already denying what he had said earlier in the morning. It's part of the ambiguity of this pontificate.

Those who are part of the LGBTQIA+ community are children of God. They are not sick. This has been made clear by the American Psychiatric Association (1973), the American Psychological Association (1975), and the World

Health Organization (1977). A scientific study was published last week on homosexuality, stating that it is not a gene that predisposes a person to homosexuality – it’s an entire chain of DNA, comprised of several genes! So, this is no biological error; it’s part of the human genome.

Our sisters and brothers of the LGBTQIA+ community are children of God. They are treasures in the heart of God. And they often suffer a great martyrdom, being discriminated against and considered second-class. In the Independent Catholic Church in the U.S., we recognize this. We love them. Yes, we even ordain them, knowing that they can be extraordinary priests in the service of God’s people!

**Fr. Jayme: What hope and/or vision do you have for U.S. Independent Catholicism?**

Fr. Libardo: Within Independent Catholicism here in the U.S., there are many reasons for hope. Independent Catholicism in the U.S. is manifesting itself as an alternative and is showing itself as having a future. It is open to the entire human reality. It doesn’t suffer the weight of so many rules. It doesn’t erect walls to keep people from seeing the face of God. Yes, Independent Catholicism has much to offer this world!

Independent Catholicism in the U.S. is on the move. “The train has left the station,” you might say. The wheels are rolling, and the hearts of many are predisposed to being part of such a beautiful reality. More and more people are manifesting a great desire to serve others and to bring Christ to those who wish to live the firstfruits of salvation.

As may be obvious by the essays I’ve shared here, and by this interview, I have many dreams and hopes for Independent Catholicism in the U.S. I hope and dream that the readers of this work might know that they are not alone, that there is a place where the doors are opened to them, a house filled with light and hope and love. That house is the Independent Catholic Church in the U.S., a house that is open to all people throughout the world.

**Fr. Jayme: What prayer might you share with the bishops, priests, deacons and lay persons who gather with us here in Austin on October 26, and what prayer might you share for those who are unable to be with us?**

Fr. Libardo: I conclude with the prayer found in the Gospel of Saint John, which is the prayer of Christ, the Good Shepherd: “That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you” (Jn. 17:21). I pray that we might open our hearts and hands to all humanity, drawing them together into one.

And so, I say to all bishops, all with their own identities, with their own rules and liturgical norms, with all that is implied by their paraphernalia and their service to small and not-so-small communities, and some to no communities at all: Let us come together as one. Let us be together the mystery of the Church, which, throughout the course of history, has sought to discover God’s will in the unity that we possess.

Philosophically speaking, each person is unique: There is no like me, and there is no one like you, with your experiences and gifts and qualities. But if we believe in one God, who is the Father and Creator of heaven and earth, and who is Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, and who is the Holy Spirit, present and active in our world, let us en flesh that trinity-in-unity by mirroring the oneness of God on this earth. Just as the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are one, let us aspire to live as one.

What a fantastic prayer! I might propose it not only for our meditation, but also for our praxis: that we might live with all in love and fellowship, respect and acceptance.

All things will pass away (Lk. 21:33), except love, says Saint Paul (1Cor. 13:13). And if I have all knowledge but do not have love, I am nothing (1Cor. 13:2-3).

Let us therefore love one another and come together as one, so as to bridge together the many islands on which we currently find ourselves. Let us aspire to be the Body of Christ. And, walking together as pilgrims on this journey, may we always desire to live as one, just as God is in us and we are in God (Jn. 17:21)!