



IGLESIA CATÓLICA ECUMÉNICA RENOVADA EN GUATEMALA
COMUNIÓN ECUMÉNICA "SANTA MARÍA DEL NUEVO ÉXODO"
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OBISPO PRIMADO

FIRST PASTORAL LETTER
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IN GUATEMALA

"ONE, HOLY, CATHOLIC AND APOSTOLIC"

To the ecclesiastic communities that form the Catholic, Ecumenical, Renewed Church in Guatemala, together with its presbyters, deacons, seminarians, and members of religious orders; and sharing our faith and our reflections also with the communion of Catholic and Apostolic Churches, chaired by the Catholic, Apostolic Church of Brazil, with which we have sealed full and perfect communion, as with all men and women of good will, who are determined that the Church, the Body of Christ, be manifest as the visible sacrament of salvation and of the unity of all creation:

1. GREETING

Peace and grace in Jesus Christ, our Lord and brother, who, by means of the Holy Spirit, has granted us pardon and new life and has entrusted to us the mission of proclaiming the Gospel to all creation, living as a holy people and as the sacramental presence of his Body, which is the Church!

2. THE CHURCH CHARGED TO CONTINUE CHRIST'S ONGOING MISSION

Brothers and Sisters: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic are the four characteristics that identify the Church established by Jesus Christ and commissioned by him to continue in the world the mission that the Father had entrusted to him. This is the unanimous witness that the Holy Scriptures give us and that, over the length of centuries, impelled first the work of the Apostles and then of those who have received from the Apostles the mission that Jesus had entrusted to them.

The Gospel of John expresses clearly the continuity that exists from the mission of Jesus to the mission of the apostles. Jesus, shortly before being glorified, prayed to the Father, "I am not going to continue in the world, but they are still in the world, while I go to be with you. I have given them your word, but the world hates them because they are not of the world, as I also am not of the world. As you sent me to be among those who are in the world, I also send them. ... And for their sake I now consecrate myself so that they too may be consecrated by the truth."¹ And so that there may be no doubt of the fact that this

¹ John 17:11, 14, 18-19.

mission is not limited to the twelve apostles but was a charge that they should pass on, the prayer continues: “I do not pray only for them, but also for those who believe in me on hearing their message. I ask you that all of them be one; that as you, Father, are in me and I in you so they also may be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the same glory that you gave me so that they may be a single thing, as you and I are one.”² After the resurrection, Jesus confirms the mission and grants them the Spirit in order to consecrate them, to give them the glory and to train them to exercise the ministry: “Then Jesus said to them again: — Peace to you! As the Father sent me, so I am sending you. And he breathed on them and said to them: — Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive any man’s sins, they stand forgiven; if you pronounce them unforgiven, unforgiven they remain.”³

3. THE APOSTOLICITY OF THE CHURCH

In order to carry out this mission, under the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit, the apostles and their successors continue to preach the Gospel, celebrate the sacraments, and organize the Church. The result was the formation of what we can call the “Apostolic Tradition.” To live it and preserve it in its integrity constitutes the fourth distinguishing mark of the Church.

Used in this sense, the word “Tradition” has nothing to do with the traditions that our communities frequently reject, considering them to be contrary to the Gospel and the voice of the Spirit. The popular sense in which tradition is spoken of is synonymous with “custom,” and indeed there are many customs in popular religion that are reprehensible because they give rise to evil, superficiality, legalism, authoritarianism and lack of commitment and keep us from discovering the true meaning of the faith. The sense in which we are using the word “Tradition” here is different from the popular usage. Etymologically “tradition” means “to hand over” or “to reveal,” and that is what it means for us. It refers to the living faith of the Apostles and of the Church of all times which is “handed over” to us by Holy Scripture, by the creeds of faith and by the liturgical and sacramental life, and which, by the work of the Holy Spirit, “reveals” to us the living presence of Jesus Christ in our midst and permits us to experience that we are in communion and continuity with the same faith and the same mission of the Apostles and the Church of all times.

4. THE CATHOLICITY OF THE CHURCH

A consequence of living the “Apostolic Tradition” is the experience of catholicity. It constitutes the third characteristic of the Church. By the witness and the work of the Holy Spirit, we are capable of recognizing the presence of Jesus Christ and the new life within us. This enables us begin to experience communion, on a personal as well as communitarian level, with those who have believed in Him in all times and in all places. Further, it impels us to live in communion with all human beings and with the whole creation and to make an effort for our communities to have space and respect for everyone and everything. Then catholicity ceases to be a mere theological concept and becomes living reality.

² John 17:20-22.

³ John 20:21-23.

5. THE HOLINESS OF THE CHURCH

To live the apostolicity and the catholicity makes us recognize that the agent who allows us to experience this communion is the Holy Spirit. For it is He who breaks the barriers of selfishness, of time and of space and transforms us so that it is not we who live but Christ who lives in us.⁴ This makes us aware of the second characteristic of the Church, which is holiness. When we discern the living presence of the Spirit, the holiness ceases to be a distant ideal, professed in the Creed of Faith or the Confession, and is identified as the experience of God living within each of us in the midst of the community. For that reason Paul calls believers “saints” or a “holy people.”⁵ (Cf. Col. 1:2) For the holiness of the Church, does not come from living according to a strict moral code but from the living presence of the Spirit who transforms and illumines and is manifest in his people. Paul expresses this reality in the letter to the Ephesians in the following way: “By the grace of God you have received salvation by means of faith. This is not anything that you yourselves have achieved, but it is the gift of God. It is not the result of your own works, lest anyone boast of anything.”⁶

6. THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

The experience of holiness as a free gift, as liberation from all the bondage and hindrances as well as from selfishness, leads to the first characteristic of the Church: its unity. This finds its basis and guarantee in the gift of the same Holy Spirit.⁷ The Church is born on the day of Pentecost by the pouring out of the Spirit.⁸ It is the Spirit then who maintains and assures her unity. Paul reminds the Ephesians and exhorts them, “Be sure to maintain the unity that comes from the Holy Spirit. There is one body and one Spirit, as God has called us to one hope. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism; there is one God and Father of us all.”⁹ For that reason we can say that the Church, in her fundamental reality is one and indivisible; for by the Spirit we enter in to form part of the Body of Christ, which is one and indivisible.¹⁰ In spite of the existence of this indestructible unity, as result of human fragility and ambitions, institutionally and historically, divisions have been created among the various ecclesiastical bodies, and these divisions mar the manifestation of and the witness to that spiritual indivisibility. From that fact it comes the necessity of committing ourselves to the work of ecumenism so that visibly and historically we can radiate the unity that the Spirit creates and guarantees in the whole Body of Christ.

7. OUR EXPERIENCE OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CHURCH

For our church and for each one of the communities that form it, the unity, the holiness, the catholicity and the apostolicity are not abstract theological concepts. Nor are they established and learned doctrines that over time have been settled on. Rather they form part of our life and our daily path.

⁴ Cf. Gal. 2:20.

⁵ Cf. Col. 1:2.

⁶ Eph. 2:8-9.

⁷ Cf. 1 Cor. 12:12-13.

⁸ Cf. Acts 2:1ff.

⁹ Cf. Eph. 4:3-5.

¹⁰ Cf. Eph. 4:12; Col. 1:18; 2:19; Eph. 2:21; 5:25-27.

That experience is what gives us unity and has enabled us to confront with peace and perseverance the adversities of rejection and marginalization. As individuals and as a community we have experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit by means of meditation on the Word of God and the liturgical life celebrated in prayer and sacrament, and this experience has created the certainty of being united in Christ to our brothers and to all humanity; we have tasted holiness in recognizing that we are incessantly made righteous, freed from sin and gifted with many charismas and ministries; we have received the sensitivity and the capacity to be inclusive and to open ourselves to communion and dialogue with all human beings, and to accept the plurality of forms of spiritual expression, thus attaining the enjoyment of catholicity in its deepest and most genuine sense; at last we have been able to get to the heart of and take on the full Apostolic Tradition.

8. ROOTS AND CONTEXT OF OUR ECCLESIASTIC EXPERIENCE

Without doubt the seeds of the deep spirituality and the vitality of our church have been sown and have been taking root through a series of special circumstances.

The fact that 98% of our communities come from fourteen indigenous ethnic groups; that the great majority of these live in situations of extreme poverty; and that very many are located in the areas that suffered the armed conflict, were persecuted, massacred, and displaced, is not a coincidence.

Also today the poor, the simple, those that are least in the eyes of the great of the world continue to be the fertile soil upon which the seed of the Kingdom may fall and give abundant fruit. In the face of such portents the words of Jesus ceaselessly resonate with intense contemporary relevance: "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for you have shown to the simple the things that you have hidden from the wise and expert."¹¹ And that makes us feel close to and in perfect harmony with the primitive communities to whom Paul said, "God has called you in spite of the fact that few of you are wise by human criteria, and few are people with authority or belong to important families. God has chosen the scorned and unimportant of this world, that is, those who are nothing, in order to bring to naught those who are something. But God himself has united you with Jesus Christ and has also made Christ be our wisdom, our justice, our sanctification and our liberation."¹²

The experience of poverty, of marginalization and of exclusion, moistened and fertilized by the blood shed by many of your grandfathers, your fathers, your relatives, in order to witness to the catholic faith, has prepared the fertile soil onto which the seeds of the Spirit have fallen and are bearing abundant fruit of joy, of liberty and of spiritual discernment.

When we see the reality that we are living, we realize with great happiness and gratitude that everything that the New Testament and the letters of the Church Fathers tell us about the life of the Church in the first centuries is exactly what we are living now: the certainty of the living presence of Christ by means of the Spirit and the multiplying of marvelous signs that testify to the divine nearness and election, accompanied, nevertheless, by lack of understanding, by persecution and exclusion. This reality makes it seem that when we

¹¹ Matt. 11:25-26.

¹² 1 Cor. 1: 26, 28, 30.

read what happened before we are reading what we are living now. And from this realization comes the certainty that we are maintaining continuity and unbreakable communion with the full Apostolic Tradition.

9. FRUITS OF OUR ECCLESIASTIC EXPERIENCE

When the Roman Catholic hierarchy declared us schismatic and broke communion with us, this certainty made us, far from being hesitant, angry or resentful, feel blessed as we identified our experience with that of the apostolic church when it was expelled from the synagogue.¹³ In the depth of our heart we have experienced, in addition to joy, a real freedom to speak clearly and comprehensively the testimony that the Spirit is inspiring us within, namely the testimony that we have the certainty of having been elected and of being upheld by the Lord.¹⁴ The one thing that has clouded our happiness is that in this act of rupture we see a sign of hardness and a lack of discernment that tries to close off the power of the Spirit that is renewing His church so that it may be today what it was in its beginnings. But even this very sadness has brought us closer to, more keenly aware of the apostolic roots, for it has made us identify ourselves with the feelings that Paul had toward the people of Israel, expressed in his letter to the Romans.¹⁵

This shared certainty has made all of us, with the exception of one community that had approached us more out of curiosity than faith, not only persevere in the alliance and in the communion but also continue to experience notable growth. At least a hundred new communities have united with us over the past year.

10. THE SACRAMENTALITY EXPERIENCED IN THE CHURCH

Notwithstanding all these signs of life and hope and the confidence that God is present in our midst and blesses us, the declaration made by the Roman Catholic hierarchy put us in a very difficult situation from the sacramental point of view. We are all aware that the flowering of life and of gifts, as well as the attraction that our communion exerts and its rapid growth, are strictly linked to the freedom in the Spirit that is alive in our communities, bringing joy and love toward everyone. We also recognize that the source from which all these gifts have come to us is the sacramental life, for we have centered our spirituality on the Eucharist.

We cannot, however, understand sacramentality in isolation from the whole life of the Church. Christ is the great sacrament by means of whom the Father communicates grace and new life to us.¹⁶ The Church is the sacrament of Christ, which, by means of her witness and ministry makes him present, to communicate his life by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷ It is in this context that we must understand the significance and the validity of the seven sacraments; for the outpouring of the Spirit, which is conveyed to us by each of them, comes from the Church as a single whole; and the gifts and ministries which are received are aimed at building up of the whole body, which is the Church herself.

¹³ Cf. John 16:2.

¹⁴ Cf. Mark 10:30.

¹⁵ Cf. Romans 10.

¹⁶ Cf. Rom. 5:12.

¹⁷ Cf. Rom. 12:4-5; I Cor. 12:12-27; Eph. 4:12; I Pet. 2:5.

According to the Apostolic Tradition, the whole Church—one, holy, catholic and apostolic, in the sense in which we experience it and have explained it—is made really, efficaciously and sacramentally present in each local church.¹⁸ Moreover, the mystery of the Church as the whole Body of Christ is uniquely concrete and manifest in each local church, which at the same time is open to communion with other local churches in order to signify its catholic and ecumenical character.

11. THE CONFIGURATION AND DIMENSIONS OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

Now then, in this letter the expression, “local church,” is to be understood as the People of God who in a particular region are organized as a communion of communities that professes the faith in accordance with the witness of the Holy Scriptures and the Confession or Ecumenical Creeds, that observes the liturgy of prayer and sacraments, recognizing as the culmination of its existence the celebration of the Eucharist, that gives witness of the Gospel as the fruit of experiencing the gifts of the Spirit from which come new life and the capacity to love, that recognizes the bishop as a visible sign of its unity, and that by this means is in communion with other local churches. The Church Fathers address this theme marvelously.

With respect to the Eucharist as a moment in which the wondrous mystery of the unity of the whole Church is realized in the local church, Cyprian of Carthage, echoing the *Didache* and Ignatius of Antioch, said, “When the Lord calls bread, which is made of many grains of ground wheat, his body he indicates thereby the union of the whole Christian people whom he carries within himself. And when he calls the wine, which is a single drink but is made of many separate grapes, his blood he indicates thereby also that the flock that we form proceeds from a multitude changed into a unity.”¹⁹

Referring to the significance of the bishop, Ignatius of Antioch in his letter to the Christians of Smyrna said, “You must all follow the lead of the bishop, as Jesus Christ followed that of the Father, and follow the presbytery as you would the Apostles. ... Let no one do anything touching the Church, apart from the bishop. Let that celebration of the Eucharist be considered valid which is held under the bishop or anyone to whom he has committed it. Where the bishop appears, there let the people be, just as where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.”²⁰ And in the letter to the Magnesians, he adds, “Just as the Lord, being one with the Father, did nothing without Him, ... so neither must you undertake anything without the bishop and the presbyters. At your meetings there must be one prayer, one mind, one hope in love, in joy that is flawless, that is Jesus Christ.”²¹ If any one of the five elements that identify the local church is lacking, its sacramentality is seriously affected, and even, as the Fathers of the Church mention, even the validity or the actions that they carry out can be questioned.

¹⁸ Cf. 1 Cor. 1:2.

¹⁹ Cyprian Epist. 69, 5:2; cf. Epist. 63, 13:4; cf. *Didache* 9:4 and 10:5; cf. Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Ephesios* 20:2.

²⁰ Letter to Smyrna, 8-9, in *The Epistles of St. Clement of Rome and St. Ignatius of Antioch*, tr. James A. Kleist (New York, c. 1946), p. 93. In the series, *Ancient Christian Writers*, vol. 1.

²¹ Letter to the Magnesians, 6-7. *Op. cit.* p. 71.

In the first centuries the local church was almost exclusively identified by a geographic territory, for it was thought that a local church could exist only in a defined territory.²² Nevertheless, over time the concept of the local church has taken on new connotations with respect to territoriality. Emigrations, situations of persecution in certain places, the problem created by the break of the visible unity of the churches and, most recently, phenomena like human mobility and globalization have progressively brought it about that the concept of the local church, while maintaining a certain geographic connection, is used also to indicate the People of God which, organized as a communion of communities, live and are configured with all the characteristics of the local church, but is constructed in places where other churches already exist. This reality, which has been hard for many to accept and which in some cases has even been the object of virulent debates since some people consider it to be contrary to the church canon,²³ has a historical justification in the diversity of rite, history, spirituality, theological tradition, etc., and it has a theological basis in a series of witnesses that we find especially in the Pauline epistles, in which there are glimpses of the fact that in the same place or region there were several local churches.²⁴ As result, the phenomenon of the coexistence of local churches in shared territories came about. This situation has occurred, for example, in the case of the Orthodox Catholic and Roman Catholic churches of the Eastern rite, which upon going into exile have organized their local churches where there already existed other local churches. It happens also in the case of the Roman Catholics of the Eastern Rite, which coexist with Catholic Orthodox churches in territories where the latter have been established for many centuries and normally tend not to tolerate or recognize this coexistence. In other territories the coexistence of Roman Catholics with Anglican Catholic churches takes place. Furthermore this is the situation in which the independent local Catholic churches find themselves, which normally coexist territorially with Roman Catholic districts and sometimes with local churches of other denominations.

12. THE SITUATION IN FACE OF THE BREAK OF COMMUNION WITH THE ROMAN CATHOLIC HIERARCHY

When the Roman Catholic hierarchy declared the break of communion with us, it was precisely the sacramental constitution of the church that inevitably put us into a situation in which, in order to guarantee that we maintain full ecclesiastical character and that we constitute ourselves in the local church as the sacramental presence of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, we had to begin “dialogues with other Catholic churches which, although not under the jurisdiction of the throne of Peter, nevertheless are capable of transmitting the apostolic succession.”²⁵

Each of the steps that we have taken was made with the prior discernment of, consultation with and approval by our General Assembly of Delegates. The August 2006 Assembly approved the communiqué that we had worked out on the fifteenth of that month, and it was decided that as soon as the Roman Catholic hierarchy made public the declaration of break of communion with us, we should begin contacts with communions of independent

²² Cf. Canon VIII of the Council of Nicea.

²³ Insofar as it was established in the Council of Nicea. (Cf. Cabib VIII).

²⁴ Cf. Gal. 1:2, 22; I Thess. 2:14; 1 Cor. 16:1, 19; 2 Cor. 8:1.

²⁵ Communication of August 15, 2006, N.7.

Catholic churches. The Plenary Assembly of November, 2006, decided to intensify communication with the communions of independent Catholic churches, and that took place in the plenary of February, 2007. In the May 12 Assembly constituted in Extraordinary Synod, in view of the progress our inter-ecclesiastical dialogue had made, knowing that the establishment of communion with whatever union of independent Catholic churches with the prospect of receiving the apostolic succession, would imply that we have a bishop, it was appropriate and in complete accord with our Basic Statutes to elect the first bishop for our church. It turned out that this unworthy servant was elected. Then, as bishop elect I was charged to proceed with contacts in order to define the path that the Lord was calling us to follow.

We had been in contact with the Catholics of the Utrecht Union since October 2006. The smooth communication with them, as well as our agreement on matters of ecclesiology and the fundamentals of the life of faith, of sacraments and witness, led to my being invited to meet with the three bishops of the Union and with representatives of their council of theologians.

In spite of the advanced stage of our communication, the problem of language and cultural difference made us decide to initiate contacts with the Catholic Apostolic Church of Brazil, but without breaking our communication with Utrecht and with the firm wish of continuing to make our relation and communion with the Union of Utrecht closer. As result of communication with the Catholic Church of Brazil, we were invited to participate in its nineteenth General Council, celebrated in Brazilia during July 2007. During the Council the situation in which our church found itself was dealt with. After a long debate, during which I could clearly perceive the presence of the Holy spirit, in spite of the strong opposition expressed at the beginning, when the moment of the vote arrived, all the bishops present voted in favor of establishing full and perfect communion with us, recognizing the outcome of the election that our church had held for its first bishop and approved that the episcopal ordination of this servant be carried out.

Afterwards, on August 10, the Council of Presbyters of our church and then on August 18 the General Assembly of Delegates approved what we had done and in this way confirmed the full and perfect communion sealed with the Catholic Church of Brazil; our intention to continue in dialogue with the Union of Utrecht was reiterated; and the date which we had tentatively agreed with the leadership of the Catholic Church of Brazil to celebrate the episcopal ordination, October 27, was approved.

The ordination will take place in the church of St. John the Baptist in Comalapa, Chimaltenango, which, by offer of the forty-five organizations that comprise that parish community and, with the unanimous approval of the August 18 Assembly of Delegates, will be declared the cathedral of our church.

With these steps, our church will be fully constituted in sacrament whereby in reality and efficacy the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church becomes visible. Our new situation entails the commitment to work to achieve communion with other local churches, having as its goal to gain full and perfect historical union among all Christians in order to be able to share the same Eucharistic table. This will be possible when all the local churches, including us, fully discover the original character of the Apostolic Tradition.

13. ERRORS CONCERNING THE SACRAMENTAL VALIDITY OF THE EPISCOPACY

It is important that we now reflect upon what, according to the one Apostolic Tradition, gives sacramental validity to an episcopal ordination and effectively establishes a local church as the sacramental presence of the one, holy, catholic, apostolic church.

The first thing that we have to confront is the widespread error that the basic criterion of validity or at least of lawfulness of the ordination of a bishop is that he be named by the Bishop of Rome, or Pope, with the consequence that the local bishop and the church he serves are subordinate to the Pope. This custom is based on the jurisdictional power that the Bishop of Rome progressively claimed for himself in order to act as Supreme Pontiff with absolute power over all the Church. Nevertheless, this innovation, introduced incrementally by the Church of Rome, is contrary to the witness of the Holy Scriptures, wherein it is clear that he who elects, and also gives the gifts needed for carrying out the ministry to which one is elected, is the Holy Spirit Himself, acting through the community that, being in prayer, is the body charged to make the discernment.²⁶ This was the practice in the early church, for it is clear that it was the community's responsibility to do the electing.²⁷ This procedure began to be altered in the East in the fourth century when the Byzantine emperors began to intervene in the nomination with the aim of making the bishops faithful to them. In the West it was in the ninth century when Emperor Charlemagne claimed this role, the alleged reason being that the bishops named be apposite to the function. This procedure brought about serious problems, and at the beginning of the thirteenth century the Popes began to try to name the bishops directly. This became common practice in the fourteenth century, although in reality many times the Pope allowed kings, emperors or cathedral chapters to control the nomination if they would pay clerical salaries. This custom is only one of the many that were introduced in the Roman Church and that indicate its progressive break with the Apostolic Tradition. The break was consummated in the Constitutions of the First Vatican Council, which declared the universal jurisdiction of the Roman pontiff, and were subsequently codified in the 1917 and 1983 Codes of Canon Law.

This practice is reprehensible because (1) it contravenes fundamental principles of the Holy Scriptures and Tradition; (2) it has been the basic cause of the division and the schisms that have occurred in the Church for more than a thousand years, into our own time; and (3) it makes the Roman Catholic Church in practice function as the one and only diocese, a mega-diocese in which de facto the only residential bishop is the Bishop of Rome, for he has universal, absolute power, beyond all appeal, and as result all the other bishops have to perform a merely subordinate role and limit themselves to planning and implementing strictly pastoral and administrative tasks, such that the concept of "communion" is turned into a synonym of "submission" and the concept of "collegiality" effectively means "subordination." With these innovations the Roman Catholic Church loses its original meaning and puts in question even its legitimacy and its capacity to carry out the mission that it received from the Lord, for it substantially distorts the charge and the mission that Jesus entrusted to the Apostle Peter.

²⁶ Cf. 1 Tim. 4:14; Acts 1:12-26; 13:1-2; 14:23.

²⁷ Cf. *Didache* 15:1.

Another error concerning the validity of apostolic succession comes from a legalistic and, to a certain extent, magical way of thinking. Many people have tried to reduce the validity of episcopal ordination to the mere fact that there exists a supposed historical apostolic succession, that is, that a bishop is ordained by the laying on of the hands of bishops who, supposedly, in an uninterrupted line have been ordained by one of the apostles. In some cases it is even thought that accumulating various apostolic lines strengthens the validity. In these contexts the concept of validity is wielded like a power or a privilege that is received by someone who, in an autonomous and to a certain extent arbitrary way, can use it according to his pleasure and give it to whomever he wants or it suits him to give it to. This perspective is, however, totally contrary to the Apostolic Tradition for, although the historical succession is an indispensable element, its sacramental validity is subordinate to its being conferred within an ecclesial context that reflects what is witnessed in the New Testament and actualized in the early church. For the same reason, the historical succession, although it may come from multiple supposed apostolic lines lacks sacramental validity when it is conferred outside the framework of the elements required in the Apostolic Tradition.

14. THE LOCAL CHURCH AS THE PEOPLE OF GOD AND SACRAMENT OF THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

Having explained these mistakes, we now move on to see why the local church is the place where the Church is manifest sacramentally, what the role is that the various forms of ordained ministry have within the local church and what the criteria are by which sacramental validity is judged, both in the local church and also in the ordained ministries, specifically that of the bishop.

For the Apostolic Tradition, the local church is the visible reality wherein the one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church, whose sacramental expression culminates in the Eucharistic celebration, makes itself present. In accord with the organization of the early church, one ought to recognize the local church as the People of God.²⁸ This is structured in a synodical and participatory form,²⁹ with a diversity of gifts and ministries. Among these is to be found the ordained ministry, composed of deacons, priests and the bishop.³⁰ The local church comprises more or less clearly a communion of communities.³¹ The principle characteristic of the local church is the equality of all its members.³² The parable of the day-workers is a magnificent illustration of this equality.³³ The basis of the equality is the fact that all the members have received the same worth on being consecrated as a priestly people³⁴ and all have been made sons and heirs, to live in freedom.³⁵ Each one has received the unction of the Holy Spirit, and therefore, against those who try to impose doctrines and practices on the community, John proclaims, “So much for those who would mislead you. But as for you, the initiation which you have received from him stays with you; you need no other teacher, but learn all you need to

²⁸ Cf. Rom. 1:6-7; 1 Cor. 1:2; Rev. 21:3.

²⁹ Cf. Acts 15:6-22.

³⁰ Cf. Acts 6:1-7; 11:30; 20:28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1-8; 5:17.

³¹ Cf. Gal. 1:2.

³² Cf. 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:28.

³³ Cf. Matt. 19:30—20:16.

³⁴ Cf. 1 Pet. 2:9ff.

³⁵ Cf. Gal. 4:28—5:1.

know from his initiation, which is real and no illusion. As he taught you, then dwell in him.”³⁶

The ministry ordained by the local church is never to be understood as something that is above the community but as a gift that, bestowed by the Holy Spirit,³⁷ is recognized by the community³⁸ and exists to serve and build up the community.³⁹ For this reason, the ministry has to be exercised with humility and with no intention of imposing its own tastes or criteria or of trying to create uniformity in place of the unity created by the Spirit, or of trying to supplant the direct action of Christ Himself. John, on having told us of the Last Supper, which is the reference point commonly accepted as the basis for the ordained ministry, ignores the cultic aspect connected with the memorial of bread and wine—on which the synoptic Gospels are centered—and limits himself to presenting to us the washing of feet, which symbolizes the attitude, required in the ordained ministry of peeling away every occasion for pride and exercising extreme humility. And as the synoptics insist that the memorial be repeated, so John insists that this deed is the model of the attitude with which the ministry is to be exercised. “You call me ‘Master’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Then if I, your Lord, have washed your feet, you ought also to wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example: you are to do as I have done for you.”⁴⁰

15. THE MEANING OF FAITH OF THE CHURCH, MANIFESTED AND WORKING IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

The active presence of the Spirit in the members of the Church enables the community in its wholeness, and not just each believer in isolation, to develop an extraordinary capacity for knowing and discerning the truth. In theology this capability is called “*sensus fidelium*” or “*sensus fidei ecclesiae*,” which can be translated as the “sense of the People of God.” This sense of faith, this perceptive understanding is not the privilege of a group of leaders or a hierarchy, but is a gift that belongs to all the community. It is the principle of basic discernment. It is what permits the creating of a consensus and it is also the basis for empowering the local church so that it may take on responsibilities, carry out its choices and hold elections. Over the course of church history, the recognition of the “sense of faith” has played a very important role. For example, when the Arian heresy, which denied the divinity of Jesus Christ, was supported by many, many bishops, it was the People of God who, with their sense of faith, made the witness prevail that the Spirit laid on their hearts and that affirmed the divinity of the Lord. Something similar happened in the Council of Ephesus, when it proclaimed faith in the fact that Jesus Christ is true God and true man. For that reason Augustine of Hippo placed greater value on the Church’s sense of faith than on the arguments that the theologians could give.⁴¹

In spite of the enormous importance that this dimension has in the Apostolic Tradition, the process of clericalization and then centralization caused the recognition of the importance

³⁶ 1 John 2:26-27.

³⁷ Cf. Acts 20:28.

³⁸ Cf. 1 Tim. 4:14; Acts 1:12-26.

³⁹ Cf. Eph. 4:11-13.

⁴⁰ John. 13:13-15.

⁴¹ Cf. Augustine, *Contra Julianum* 1, 29 and 31.

of “sense of the people of God” to lose its relevance, and become reduced to a mere theological concept that is explained in a more or less artificial form. For the same reason, space for expression and participation in the actual life of the local church became closed to the People of God in the attempt to reduce them to the status of more or less submissive and passive receivers of the arrangements made by the hierarchy on pain of being accused of insubordination and lack of humility and of undergoing marginalization and persecution and eventually of being expelled from the institution.

Let me share an anecdote of something that happened when I was hardly nine years old but that made me understand completely and vividly what later I came to understand was called the “sense of faith.” I was studying in a religious school, to which I owed much and which left a deep mark on me. One afternoon it was raining and one of my companions played a prank. In that moment one of the Brothers approached and reprimanded him violently. I didn’t say a single word, but in the bottom of my heart there was something that made me feel and think, “The God of this Brother is not the same God I believe in and whom I have encountered.” The God who was living in my heart was a God of love, of mercy, of freedom, which did not seem to correspond to the one that the teacher was projecting. I didn’t judge him nor get angry and went on respecting and appreciating him as before. But, as I said in the letter in which I gave up the ministerial responsibilities that I had within the Roman Catholic Church, my experience of God had already created in me an internal freedom vis-à-vis the interpretations and the institutional understanding of faith. This made me feel close to and deeply identified with the persons and witnesses in the Holy Scriptures and, although over the course of years I tried hard to make everything fit within what was conventionally admissible, I was progressively realizing that there were many elements that in fact did not fit within the official interpretations to which I had to submit.⁴² The “sense of faith” was drawing me to the Bible and to what later I learned was called Tradition, and so to a large dimension of the People of God. Yet it made me feel strange in the midst of the hierarchical institutional frameworks.

What I did not know was that the Lord was holding a marvelous surprise in store for me. On meeting with all the communities that comprise our communion, I would finally come to experience what in the fullest sense the “sense of the faith of the Church” means: it is the convergence of all the people believing the faith, which lets the consensus spring forth spontaneously and naturally. Even before being expressed and approached by apparently divergent paths, the same conclusions are reached. There is a diversity of stories and spiritualities, but there exists a single communion and even a single form of expression of the faith in which the various stories and spiritualities fully coincide. This coming together allows a full unity to be established, for it is not the fruit of pressures or compromises or conventions. The living presence of the Spirit is experienced and, furthermore, on reading the witness of the Holy Scriptures, one has the sensation of reading one’s own story; referring to us as much as to facts and persons of the past, Scripture changes into a presence and communion that is actualized in the present. Then what is truly the Apostolic Tradition is lived; one achieves the certainty of being in full communion with that church—one, holy, catholic and apostolic—which Christ founded and which goes on revitalizing, sustaining and guiding in the present.

⁴² Cf. personal letter of January 2, 2003.

16. THE ELECTION OF THE BISHOP AS THE RIGHT AND RESPONSIBILITY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

The capacity, coming directly from the Holy Spirit, to discern, to create consensus, to experience the unity and to celebrate the faith through prayer and the sacraments is what makes each local church to be a true sacrament in which the totality of the Church is manifest and it is the basis of the rights and responsibilities that the local church has. Among the rights and responsibilities the election of its own bishop occupies a very great place. This ministry, given by the Lord as a gift, among the other charismas, ought to be discerned and recognized by the local church. It is for this reason that this practice cannot be regarded only as a procedure that, as we explained above, was practiced in the first millennium, but that, given the solid basis that it has in Holy Scripture and in the sacramental constitution of the Church as a priestly people, ought to be rediscovered and reestablished as an integral part of the Apostolic Tradition wherever it has been lost. For this reason, we consider that the first criterion for the legitimacy and apostolic validity of the episcopacy is that it be the local church, comprising the People of God organized as a communion of communities, together with its ordained ministers and, acting participatorily and synodically in a climate of prayer and discernment, carries out the election. In such circumstances the task of the local church is that of recognizing, on basis of its sense of faith, which of the ordained ministers is the one to whom the Lord has chosen and given the grace to exercise the episcopacy. If this first criterion is eliminated, it is our sense that all the other steps are like castles in the air, because an original and essential element of the Apostolic Tradition has been violated.

17. DIMENSIONS OF THE TRANSMISSION OF THE APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION

After this first step and continuing to reckon with the discernment and consensus of all the People of God, an effort is made to have the election, duly performed by the local church, recognized and ratified by the other local churches that are its neighbors. Through this process, the tie to the historical episcopacy is made real and actual. This process is generally known by the generic term, "apostolic succession." It means having the elected bishop ordained by a college of bishops that, in turn, have been ordained by other bishops and whose origins claim to go back to the apostles themselves. The Tradition generally recognized that this function was appropriately served by the college of bishops that, consisting of nearby bishops and presided over by the metropolitan (who was also called primate bishop or archbishop) constituted the ecclesiastical province in which the respective local church was found.⁴³ Through the recognition and ratification of the election and the subsequent ordination, the one elected entered the episcopal college and in this way the meaning of the catholic and ecumenical communion of the local church was signified. For the participation of the local church's bishop in the episcopal college became the means by which it entered into communion with other churches and shared the concern for the Church universal.

Over the course of history, the Orthodox Catholic churches and the Anglican Catholics have preserved the synodical organization and authority of the college. The Church of Rome, however, introduced innovations that have suppressed the capacity of the episcopal college to act effectively. We believe that, in order to propel the reestablishment of the Apostolic Tradition among the Catholic churches of the West, the Lord has raised

⁴³ Cf. Canon IV, 1 Council of Nicea.

up colleges of Catholic bishops, organized in various communions of churches, who have reestablished the apostolic practice. Among these the two most relevant are: the Union of Churches of Old Catholics of Utrecht, which is the oldest, and with which, as we explained, we maintain a close relation that, because of the concord that we found with them, we hope to continue deepening, and the Communion of Catholic Apostolic Churches, presided by the Catholic Apostolic Church of Brazil, which is the most numerous and with which, as also mentioned, we have sealed full and perfect communion and from which we receive the historical apostolic succession.

As result, our conviction is that in order to establish the historical chain of apostolic succession it is not enough that one or several bishops with supposed apostolic lineage lay their hands on a candidate. We believe that it is indispensable that the election be carried out by a local church in accordance with its constitution, and afterwards that this be recognized and ratified by the appropriate college of bishops, and that the candidate begin the process of incorporation into that episcopal college in order then to proceed to his ordination. If any of these steps is omitted the historical chain of apostolic succession loses its full genuine meaning. And if any basic element within the process of transmission of the historical apostolic succession be lacking, it is seriously questionable whether the historical chain of apostolic succession is truly established.

18. THE “RECEPTION” ON THE PART OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

We consider the other indispensable element in the process of implementing the full Apostolic Tradition consists of the local church’s “reception” of the elected bishop. In our specific case this element implies two things. First and above all, the joyful acceptance, on the part of the totality of the People of God that form our church, of the episcopal election carried out by the delegates who participated in the May 12 Synod. Second, it involves awareness and happy acceptance of the fact that, the episcopal election having been recognized and ratified by the full Council of Bishops of the Catholic Apostolic Church of Brazil and then the episcopal ordination having been celebrated by them, we are entering into communion with other local churches. Then, on being a fully constituted local church, we receive the capacity to be the sacrament and presence of the totality of the Catholic Church. This further means that while we maintain our identity and autonomy intact we take on the promise of prayer and of concern for the wellbeing of the whole Church Universal.

19. IMPLEMENTING THE APOSTOLIC TRADITION WITH CARE

As is clear to everyone, during the course of our process of discernment we have tried to adhere faithfully and carefully to each of the three criteria that, from the perspective of the Apostolic Tradition, give sacramental validity to the local church and to the ordination of its bishop. For we are fully convinced that what justifies our existence and will assure that we shall continue to grow and to ferment renewal will be our readiness and commitment to serve the goal that all the elements and characteristics that comprise the genuine, complete Apostolic Tradition be rediscovered and reestablished. That means, full of the Holy Spirit and living in free, pluralist and inclusive communities, we may succeed in our mode of organizing and living as the Church to take shape in all ways to which the Scriptures witness and according to which the indivisible Church lived. To that end we believe that we ought to continue on the road along which the Lord has guided us up to now, for he has given us signs and experiences that give us certainty that we are in full

catholic and apostolic communion. But it is also required of us that with profound humility we be continuously converted and renewed so that, our old self being peeled away, we may be able to discover and transmit, with ever greater clarity, the inestimable treasures of his Kingdom.

20. TIME OF GRACE FOR OUR CHURCH: OUR ECUMENICAL COMMITMENT

We see the moment in which we are living as “God’s Time—a time of special grace for us.” For on being constituted sacramentally as a local church in which is manifest and made real the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, symbolized by the presence of the bishop and by the link with other local churches, we can experience, at least spiritually, the ecumenical and catholic communion. Equally we recognize our commitment to work tirelessly so that, the original meaning of ordained ministry, of the episcopal ministry in general and of the Petrine ministry in particular being rediscovered, it may be possible to obtain the desired historical unity in and through pluralism, diversity, respect and in the knowledge of the worth, identity, special characteristics and functions of each local church.

This implies that the Bishop of Rome, as successor of the Apostle Peter, reestablish fully the characteristics and talents of the ministry that Christ gave him in order to preside in love⁴⁴ and that he resume that style of ministerial practice, which the indivisible church recognized in him during the first millennium, of being first among equals, without diminishing the autonomy that Christ conferred upon⁴⁵ and the Apostolic Tradition recognized for each local church. It also entails that each of the local churches and the collegial bodies to which they are joined be open to recognize that Christ is the only Lord and true Shepherd of his Church and that by the Holy Spirit he continues being the master who teaches and effectively guides the whole church,⁴⁶ according to which what behooves us who are ordained ministers, independently of the rank that our ministry has, is to embody radically the attitude of Christ who, “though the divine nature was his from the start, did not think to snatch at equality with God, but made himself nothing, assuming the nature of a slave.”⁴⁷ And who taught us clearly that he who receives a ministry within the Church, in contrast to what happens in the world, “... must serve others, and whoever among you wants to be first must be the willing slave of all—like the Son of Man; he did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give up his life as a ransom for many.”⁴⁸

21. IMPLICATIONS OF OUR ECUMENICAL COMMITMENT

From the vantage point of our poverty and small size, we see ourselves in communion with the whole Church and feel ourselves called to pray, to be concerned for and to love every human being and all of creation. Therefore we say with St. Augustine, “Those who tell us, ‘You are not our brethren,’ call us pagans. ... And they ask us, ‘Why are you looking for us, what do you want with us?’ Let us reply, ‘Ye are our brethren.’ They may say, ‘Go away, we have no connection with you,’ but we have an undoubted connection with you: we make confession of one and the same Christ, we ought to be in one Body. ... Therefore we pray ... for those who are carnal-minded, who are yet our brethren, who

⁴⁴ Cf. John 21:15-19; Ignatius of Antioch, Prologue of the Letter to the Romans.

⁴⁵ Cf. Matt. 18:18.

⁴⁶ Cf. Matt. 23:9, John 14:16; 14:26; 15:26 and 16:7.

⁴⁷ Phil. 2:6-7.

⁴⁸ Matt. 20:26-28.

celebrate the same holy mysteries ... who make answer with the same Amen, identical though not in our company; pour forth to God the quintessence of your charity on their behalf.”⁴⁹ As concrete manifestation of this love and communion, in the culminating moment of our life, that is, the moment when, on celebrating the Eucharist, our church is actualized as sacrament of the whole Church, we have chosen to sustain our explicit prayer for the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, for all other bishops, for ordained ministers and for those who, from their convictions, care for the People of God, which, in a more or less explicit form, comprises the entire humanity redeemed by the precious blood of Christ. This prayer, spoken in such a sublime moment, is to be a sign of the importance we see in our commitment to work with boldness and resoluteness toward the goal that the communion of all churches and all humanity, which, by the witness of the Spirit, is for us a spiritual reality, move progressively toward and finally reach its historical fullness in which, within the knowledge of the autonomy of each local church, a visible unity is manifest as we are chaired in love by the Bishop of Rome, successor of the Apostle Peter, as the first among equals.

22. CONCLUSION: IN THE PROCESS OF CONVERSION: WITH THE ATTITUDE OF ST. MARY

We know that the road is hard. Nevertheless, now that we are constituted in the sacramental presence of the Church Universal, and the certainty of the Lord’s call to us is reaffirmed, we feel full of the grace of the Spirit and of divine energy to fulfill the mission that has been entrusted to us. Setting off on this road, we are aware that it behooves us to commit ourselves to the goal that each of the communities comprising our church may be continuously renewed with the power of the Spirit. We also know that we must strengthen ourselves so that in every aspect of the life of our communities and of all our church every aspect inherent in the whole Apostolic Tradition may be carefully reestablished in thought, feeling, celebrating, in witness, in spreading the Gospel, in the ministry of presiding, in ecclesiastical structure, and above all in love. And from this attitude of humility and continuous conversion and renewal it befits us to support by all possible means, the work whereby as communities and as churches we may attain full historical unity.

With deep joy and enthusiasm we entrust this new exodus to St. Mary, Helper of Christians, and with her and like her we say to the Father, “Fiat” (“Let it be to me according to your word”) “Ut unum sint” (“So that we all may be one, as the Father and His Son are one in the Holy Spirit”).

San Lucas Sacatepéquez, 29 September, Solemnity of Archangels Michael, Gabriel and Raphael, thirty-third anniversary of my ordination as priest, in the year 2007

+ Eduardo Cristián Aguirre-Oestmann
 Primate Bishop Elect
 Renewed Ecumenical Catholic Church of Guatemala
 In full and perfect communion with the Catholic and Apostolic Church of Brazil

⁴⁹ Augustine, Commentary on the Psalms 32:29: CCI 272-273. In *Saint Augustine on the Psalms*, tr. Dame Scholastica Hebgin and Dame Felicitas Corrigan (New York, c. 1961), vol. 2, pp. 142-43. Volume 30 in the series, *Ancient Christian Writers*.