



Asian Journal of Religious Studies

“The Lord is truly among us.”

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The People's and Priests' Pope

The Holy Father was true to his name when he published a fatherly letter to priests on the occasion of the 160th anniversary of the death of St. John Vianney, on August 4, 2019. The letter was remarkable in many ways, a most exemplary text in understanding how Pope Francis brings our tradition alive and uses it to face the challenges and opportunities of our day.

First, there is his brutal frankness. He begins by addressing the clergy sex abuse and its effects on the presbyterate. "As you know, we are firmly committed to carrying out the reforms needed to encourage from the outset a culture of pastoral care, so that the culture of abuse will have no room to develop, much less continue," he writes. "This task is neither quick nor easy: it demands commitment on the part of all. If in the past, omission may itself have been a kind of response, today we desire conversion, transparency, sincerity and solidarity with victims to become our concrete way of moving forward. This in turn will help make us all the more attentive to every form of human suffering."

The direct acknowledgement of both the scourge and the challenges they face is followed by a deeply spiritual insight: Accompanying the victims of abuse will "make us all the more attentive to every form of human suffering," comments Michael Sean Winters in *The National Catholic Reporter*.

Second, there is the deeply traditional understanding of sin and grace at work in the life of the church. "Let us not grow discouraged! The Lord is purifying his Bride and converting all of us to himself. He is letting us be put to the test in order to make us realize that without him we are simply dust," Francis writes, quoting from a talk he gave to the presbyterate of Rome earlier this year. "He is rescuing us from hypocrisy, from the spirituality of appearances. He is breathing forth his Spirit in order to restore the beauty of his Bride, caught in adultery. We can benefit from rereading the sixteenth chapter of Ezekiel. It is the history of the Church, and each of us can say it is our history too. In the end, through your sense of shame, you will continue to act as a shepherd. Our humble repentance, expressed in silent tears before these atrocious sins and the unfathomable grandeur of God's forgiveness, is the beginning of a renewal of our holiness."

How different his words are from the programmatic, managerial understanding of the life of the church we encounter so often in this country, so focused on who has power.

Francis' spirituality is also very traditional and very vibrant: No flashy new lights for him. In the section on praise, he begins by recalling the Magnificat, and how when he visits a Marian shrine "I like to spend time looking at the Blessed Mother and letting her look at me." He continues, "Perhaps at times our gaze can begin to harden, or we can feel that the seductive power of apathy or self-pity is about to take root in our heart. Or our sense of being a living and integral part of God's People begins to weary us, and we feel tempted to a certain elitism. At those times, let us not be afraid to turn to Mary and to take up her song of praise."

In keeping with this letter, this issue of AJRS takes up some articles on priesthood and its relevance.

The Editorial team wishes the readers the hope and joy of the coming Christmas! May it be a truly blessed Christmas for all of us!

-The Editor