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POPE FRANCIS

Letters of Tribulation

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Preface

Pope Francis

I remember when I offered Father Miguel Ángel Fiorito, SJ, the draft of the preface I had written for the first edition of the *Letters of Tribulation*. The Master (we called him that because that is what he was, and what he remains today, given his accomplishment in forming a school of discernment) asked me to further develop the last paragraph, where I had mentioned the importance of having recourse to self-reproach (cf. *Spiritual Exercises*, 48).

That section had to do with discerning and dealing with the external shame and confusion that reign when the Evil One unleashes a fierce persecution against the children of the Church by confronting that persecution with the healthy shame and confusion with which the infinite Mercy of the Lord and his Faithfulness provide those who seek forgiveness for their sins. “There is a grace there,” he told me. “Develop that.”

PREFACE

Thirty years later we are in a different context, yet the War is the same, and it is the Lord's. These *Letters* are “a treatise on discernment in times of confusion and tribulation.” Their re-publication finds us still besieged, yet determined, together with our colleagues who have shared their reflections in this book, to continue carrying out the task that I was given by the Master—a task that now has for me the aura of an ancient prophecy—to “develop a grace.”

I feel that the Lord is asking me to share again the *Letters of Tribulation*, to share them with all those who—in the midst of the confusion that the father of lies can sow in his persecutions—have decided to fight the good fight, free of the victimhood to which we are tempted to surrender and which, as we know, can hide in one's heart the inclination for revenge that does nothing but feed the evil it pretends to eliminate.

Faced with any temptation to confusion and defeatism, it is good for us to return, to feel the paternal spirit of those who preceded us and that animates these *Letters*. They teach us to choose consolation in moments of greatest desolation.

I recommend reading them and praying with them. These *Letters* are—and have been for many people at particular moments of life—a true source of gentleness, courage, and luminous hope.

8 November 2018

Francesco

The Doctrine of Tribulation

Jorge Mario Bergoglio, SJ

The texts that follow were written by two fathers general of the Society of Jesus: Fr. Lorenzo Ricci (elected general in 1758) and Fr. Jan Roothaan (elected in 1829). Both of them led the Society in difficult times of persecution. During the generalate of Fr. Ricci the suppression of the Society by Pope Clement XIV occurred.

For a long time the Bourbon courts were “demanding” that such a measure be taken. Pope Clement XIII [with the 1765 bull *Apostolicum Pascendi* – Ed.] confirmed the Institute founded by Saint Ignatius, but nevertheless the bashing of the Order by the Bourbon courts did not stop until the publication [by Clement XIV – Ed.] of the brief *Dominus ac Redemptor* in 1773 when the Society of Jesus was suppressed.¹

1. There are various historical interpretations of the conduct of Pope Clement XIV. The point of view of each one of them is always based on some objective reality. I do not think that it is always right to absolutize a truth, transforming it into the only interpretative key. A good summary of this theme is found in G. Martina, *La Iglesia de Lutero a nuestros días*, 4 vols. (Madrid: Cristiandad, 1974, 2: 271–87). It also provides an abundant bibliography. The judgment that Ludwig Pastor makes regarding Clement XIV in his *History of the Popes* (Vol. 37) is extremely harsh. For example: “Clement XIV’s weakness of character is the key to understanding his tactic of

Fr. Roothaan also experienced difficult times marked by liberalism and the entire current of the Enlightenment that gave rise to “modernity.” In both cases, in that of Fr. Ricci and that of Fr. Roothaan, the Society was attacked mainly for its devotion to the Apostolic See: it was an indirect attack on the Church. Nevertheless, deficiencies were not lacking within the ranks of the Jesuits themselves.

It is not a matter here of going into more details about the history. What has been said is enough to frame this period of

conceding in everything possible to the demands of the Bourbon courts and by this means to restore peace...” (p. 90). “The most fatal quality of the new pope: weakness and timidity which were equaled by his deceit and mental slowness” (p. 82). “Pope Clement lacks courage and firmness; he is incredibly slow in resolving issues. He captivates people with pretty words and promises; he deceives and fascinates people. Initially he promises heaven and earth; later he raises difficulties and postpones the solution, in the Roman fashion, emerging triumphant in the end. In this way everyone gets caught in his net. He puts up a good appearance to avoid arriving at a decision in answer to the concerns of ambassadors; he dismisses them with nice words and cheerful hopes, which then are never realized. Whoever seeks to gain some favor had better try to do so at the first audience. Moreover, a perceptive ambassador can discover his underlying insincerity because he is so given to talk” (pp. 82–83). These are judgments that Pastor makes based on documents of the period, and while his opinion of Pope Ganganelli ends up being negative, his opinion of Ganganelli’s secretary, Friar Bontempi, also a Conventual Franciscan, is much more negative. Pastor “charges” Bontempi with being practically the main person responsible for Ganganelli’s errors. According to Pastor, Bontempi attempted to commit an act of simony by soliciting payment in return for the suppression of the Society. Bontempi succeeded in getting Clement XIV to name him a cardinal *in pectore*, but he failed to get his nomination made public when the pope was on his deathbed. Pastor presents Bontempi as an ambitious type without scruples who moves backstage behind the drapes and tries to be on “good relations with everyone” and thus prepares for his future.

the two fathers general. What is important is to realize that in both cases the Society of Jesus *experienced tribulation*, and the letters that follow are *the doctrine regarding tribulation* that both superiors recall for their members. They constitute a treatise about tribulation and how to endure it.

In times of disturbance, times in which the commotion of persecution, tribulations, doubts, and so forth arises as a result of cultural and historic events, it is not easy to discover the right road to follow. There are various temptations proper to such times: to argue over ideas, to not give to the matter the importance it should be given, to concentrate too much on the persecutors, to keep going over the desolation in one's mind, and the like.

In the following letters we see how both fathers general deal with such temptations, propose to the Jesuits a *doctrine* that forges them in their own spirituality,² and

2. Fr. Joseph de Guibert, SJ, in *The Jesuits: Their Spiritual Doctrine and Practice*, ed. George E. Ganns, SJ (Chicago: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1964) states: "In accord with this (he refers to Decree 11 of the 19th General Congregation which elected Fr. Ricci as General of the Order) a series of poignant letters is found addressed by the new General to his religious men as the number of difficult situations piles up and dangers increase. On December 8, 1759, the day following Pombal's decrees destroying the Portuguese Provinces, he invites prayer for the immediate coming of the *spiritum bonum*, the true supernatural spirit of vocation, perfect docility to divine grace. Again on November 30, 1761, at the very moment when the storm reaches France, he asks that all one's trust be placed in God, that the trials be taken advantage of for the purification of souls, and that it be remembered that these trials bring us nearer to God and also serve for the greater glory of God. On November 13, 1763, he insists on the necessity of making prayer more effective through holiness of life, recommending above all humility, the spirit of poverty and the perfect obedience requested by St. Ignatius. On June 17, 1769, after the expulsion of the Spanish Jesuits, there is a new call

strengthen their belonging to the entire body of the Society. This belonging comes first and ought to prevail over all other memberships (in all kinds of institutions internal or external to the Society). This sense of belonging ought to characterize

to prayer and to zeal to purify oneself of minor defects. Finally, on February 22, 1773, six months before the signing of the brief *Dominus ac Redemptor*, in the face of a total lack of human assistance, Fr. Ricci wants to see the effect of God's mercy which invites those afflicted with trials to trust only in Him; he also exhorts the men to prayer, but only to ask for the preservation of a Society faithful to the spirit of its calling: 'If, God forbid, it should lose that spirit, its suppression would be of no importance, since it would have made itself useless for the purpose for which it was founded.' He finishes with a warm exhortation to maintain in their fullness the spirit of charity, of union, of obedience, of patience, and of evangelical simplicity. Such are the words with which Divine Providence wanted to close the spiritual history of the Society at that moment of supreme testing, of total sacrifice which would be demanded of it. Cordaro, and others after him, have criticized in Ricci an excessive passivity in the face of the attacks of which his Order was the object, a lack of energy and ability to take advantage of all the means at his disposal to frustrate the attacks. This is not the place to discuss whether such a criticism is well founded; but what are certainly preferable are invitations to hear repeated calls for supernatural fidelity, to holiness of life, and to the special grace of God in prayer as things that are essential at those final hours of the Order on the eve of death, rather than holding on to human abilities, legitimate, but without a doubt completely useless" (pp. 318–19). "There is hardly any need to recall the protest that Fr. Ricci near death took pains to read at the moment he received viaticum in the prison of *Castel Sant'Angelo* on November 19, 1775: at the moment of appearing before the tribunal of infallible truth, it was his duty to protest that the destroyed Society had given no reason for its suppression. He declared and gave witness to this with the certainty which a well-informed superior can morally possess regarding the state of his Order, as well as to not having himself given any motive whatsoever, no matter how small, for his imprisonment" (ibid., note 71).

any other commitment which, because of it, is transformed in “mission.”³

Behind the cultural and sociopolitical stances of that epoch there is an underlying *ideology*: the Enlightenment, liberalism, absolutism, regalism, and so on. Nevertheless, what captures one’s attention is how both fathers general—in their letters—do not attempt to “argue” with ideologies. They know full well that in such stances there are errors, lies, ignorance... Nevertheless, they leave those things aside and—in addressing the body of the Society—they center their reflection on *the confusion* that such ideas (and their cultural and political consequences) produce in the heart of Jesuits. It would appear that they feared the problem might not be properly approached. It is true that there was a struggle of ideas, but they preferred to go rather to life, to the situation that such ideas provoked.

Ideas are discussed; situations are discerned. These letters are meant to provide elements of discernment to Jesuits experiencing tribulation. Hence, in their arguments the superiors general prefer to mention confusion rather than error, ignorance, or lies. Confusion finds a place in the heart: it is the coming and going of diverse spirits. Truth or falsehood in the abstract is not the object of discernment. Confusion, however, is. Rather than argue about ideas, these letters *recall the doctrine*, and by means of it, lead the Jesuits *to take charge of their own vocation*.

Given the seriousness of those times and the ambiguity of specific situations, the Jesuit *ought to discern*, ought to pull himself together in terms of who he is as a member of the Society. He is not allowed to opt for any solutions that would

3. The 32nd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, Decree 4, No. 66.

simply deny contrary and real polarities. He should seek to find *God's will* instead of an outcome that would leave him tranquil. The sign of his having discerned well would be found in peace (a gift of God), and not in the apparent tranquility of human equilibrium or of opting for an either/or.

Put in concrete terms, it is not of God to defend truth at the price of charity, nor charity at the price of truth, nor equilibrium at the price of both of them. In order to avoid becoming a truthful destroyer or a charitable liar or a confused paralytic, one needs to discern. It is the job of the superior to help in discernment. This is the deepest meaning of the letters that follow: an effort on the part of the head of the Society to help the body assume an attitude of discernment. This paternal attitude rescues the body from spiritual helplessness and rootlessness.

Finally, one more point about method. Recourse to the fundamental truths that give meaning to our membership or belonging appears to be the only way to properly approach discernment. Saint Ignatius recalls this whenever faced with a choice: "The focus of our intention ought to be simple, looking only at that for which [we are] created."⁴ Moreover, it should not surprise us that in these letters the fathers general refer to the sins of Jesuits themselves, sins which, in a merely discursive but not discerning approach, would seem to have nothing to do with the external situation of confusion provoked by the persecutions.

What then happens is not a matter of chance. There is here a dialectic proper to the situational context of discernment—a dialectic that involves seeking interiorly within oneself a state of being similar to the external state. In

4. Cf. *Spiritual Exercises*, 169.

this case, seeing oneself solely as persecuted could engender the bad spirit of “feeling like a victim,” like an object of injustice, for example. Outside, because of persecution, there is confusion . . . In considering his own sins the Jesuit asks for “shame and confusion for himself.”⁵ This is not the same thing, but it seems so; and in this way he is better disposed to do discernment.

Thus, with the letters that follow, we place in the hands of our readers this jewel of our spirituality.⁶

December 25, 1987

5. *Ibid.*, 48.

6. *Epistolae Praepositorum Generalium ad Patres et Fratres Societatis Jesu*, Vol. 4, Rollarii, Iulii De Meester, 1909, 257–346. The letters that follow were translated from the original Latin by Fr. Ernesto Dann Obregón, SJ. (Ed. – In this volume the translation relies on both the Spanish and Italian editions.)