

"I believe in the Church"

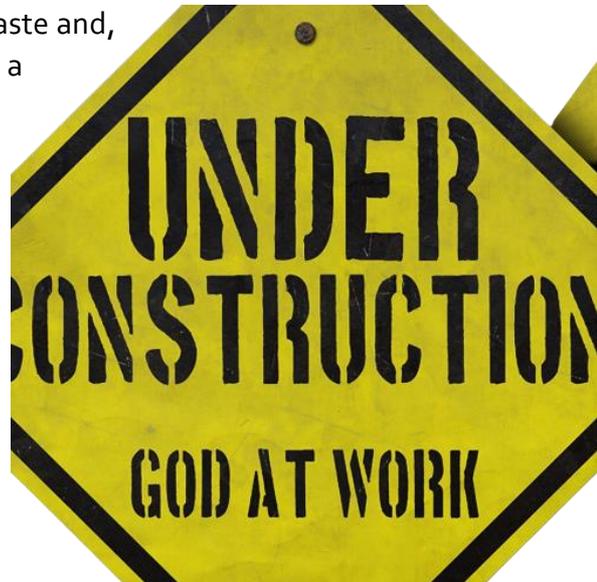
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Superior General*

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Dear brothers,

Every Sunday, during the celebration of the Eucharist, we profess our faith together. The Christian community, gathered in the name of Jesus, confesses: "I believe in the Catholic Church". We do so, having professed faith in God the Father, Son and Spirit. That said, in the life of faith, when at times God can appear elusive to us, his face hidden, our prayers returned with a great silence, so too faith in the Church can be difficult, a struggle, for us.

We know that the Church is holy and sinful, chaste and, as the early Church Fathers strongly worded it, a harlot. Understandably, there are times when this knowledge can become painful to live with. How slow come the changes - personal or institutional - that we desire for our Church, whether it is to be more fraternal, prayerful or more at the service of men and women. How difficult it is to learn from our contradictions, crimes, or institutional dysfunctions so that our Church may be a house of peace and justice, and that all in our world (women and men) may find in the Church welcome and respect and a reason to continue to hope!



In this context, professing our faith in the Church is to repeatedly entrust it to the Lord who counts on it, on its members. He has willed that this scandalous mediation that at times we are, should be his visible Body. And therefore, as believers and as pastors, we need to return to the Lord and ask him: What do you want to make of your Church, with its lights and shadows? We need to ask him: "Help us to confess our sin and to embrace our weakness so that it is your strength and not ours that shines forth and gives glory to your name and to your transforming power."

In the liturgy we say "I believe in the Church", using the first person singular. But there is present in the liturgy both the voice of the shepherd and the people that the Lord has called to follow him. Therefore, in that "I believe" resounds the "we" of the ecclesial community, those of your Church, Lord.

On 5 January this year the funeral of Benedict XVI was celebrated in St. Peter's. In his spiritual testament, written on 29 August 2006, the pastor addresses all those entrusted to his care, exhorting them to remain firm in the faith. The theologian Ratzinger, who has accompanied the debates in theology and who has had to endure attacks and a questioning of the Church as the mediator of salvation with reflective serenity, was able to witness to the certainty that he had: "I have seen, and see, how, out of the tangle of hypotheses, the reasonableness of faith has emerged and is emerging anew. Jesus Christ is truly the Way, the Truth, and the Life - and the Church, in all her shortcomings, is truly His Body."

This certainty was undoubtedly severely tested in the exercise of his pontificate. There was no end of reasons to question it, whether in the contradictions proper to the institution itself, or in the inadequacy he may have personally experienced, with regard to his responsibility as pastor which surely weighed on his shoulders. But the shepherd's certainty is strengthened by the faith, the witness of life and the prayer of the People of God: in every Eucharist celebrated, the People of God pray for their shepherds!

The Church is truly the Body of Christ

This certainty that the Church is truly the Body of Christ would have become a paschal certainty, at times crucifying and at times luminous, that sustained him in the service of the flock he shepherded. This is beautifully captured by Francis, in what could be the portrait of the shepherd that Benedict was: "Attuned in prayerful devotion, a devotion silently shaped and refined amid the challenges and resistance that every pastor must face (cf. 1 Pet 1:6-7) in trusting obedience to the Lord's command to feed his flock (cf. Jn 21:17). Like the Master, a shepherd bears the burden of interceding and the strain of anointing his people, especially in situations where goodness must struggle to prevail and the dignity of our brothers and sisters is threatened (cf. Heb 5:7-9)."

Faith in the Church matures and develops in a very special way in the exercise of shepherding the People that the Lord Jesus himself entrusts to us. Together with the People, as shepherds, we are who we are and who we are called to be. Together we follow Jesus, the Good Shepherd who is also the Lamb slain. If, and when the Church, whose body we form, sometimes hurts us, it is because we love her. In her we have received faith. We are convinced that the Lord is our shepherd and leads us. Through our many contradictions and sustained by the faith of our saints, the Lord is purifying us so that we may be more and more his Church, and in this way continue to love and serve humanity, his and our brothers and sisters.

Profession of love and hope in the Church

Another pastor who saw his hope mature in the Church as the body of Christ, was our brother Esteban Gumucio ssc. Filled with gratitude for the untiring faith of the Lord in his pastors and in his believers, he expressed his profession of love and hope in the Church:

Universal, but not indeterminate
For all, but demanding.
Sympathetic, but not complacent.
Humble, but not foolish.
For all, but not of all.

May the pastoral mission and our accompaniment of the people of God whom the Lord has entrusted to us renew us in our profession of loving faith and hope in the Church.

Fraternally,

Alberto Toutin ssc
Superior General