

An open letter to Pope Francis

Pope Francis, you need vibrant parishes and the parishes need you!

Pope Francis, your vision of the Church moves us: a Church following the path and the spirit of Jesus; united in respect and candor, as equals, as true fellow travelers – squarely facing those who are marginalized and most in need of solidarity. Instead of deepening rifts, you bring us together. Instead of judging, you seek to understand. Instead of closing doors, you open hearts. Here, the original model of the Church, as Jesus has shown us through his own life, is finally perceived again.

Countless people throughout the world cheer you on because they share this vision, very much in line with the Second Vatican Council. Even more, they live up to it as well as they can – at home, in the local parishes at the grassroots basis of the Church. Here, in the everyday life of the people, Church exists – or not. Here, and only here, the Church experiences its day-to-day *raison d'être*.

Pope Francis, you need the parishes to bring your vision of the Church to life. Without active parishes, your vision lacks the foundation and the necessary strength to overcome opposition. Our parishes are the future of Jesus' Church; but it is exactly the future of these parishes that is massively threatened.

Around the world, our bishops increasingly respond to the priest shortage by merging active and vibrant parishes into anonymous and unmanageable superstructures. Merging seems to be the formula of the hour. But in the new mega-parishes, personal contact between people and ministers is lost. The sacraments and the priests are removed ever further from the everyday life of church citizens. And where the wellspring of the community, the celebration of the Eucharist, is celebrated less and less often, communion falls by the wayside. Instead of caring for souls, priests are busy with coordination and administration. While they are supposed to be everywhere, they find themselves nowhere fully at home. In such parishes, the living breath of Jesus cannot be found; instead, God's people feel alienated, unsettled and insecure. Here, the Church is no longer close to the people, but consciously removes itself from its base.

We, concerned priests and deacons, ministers and committed Church citizens in the parishes of this world are no longer willing to walk this path. Together, we seek new paths to a future of our Church with vibrant parishes; parishes where everyone is welcome – without exception. And such ways exist! Many parishes have long shown by example how things can be done differently.

There are women and men, married couples, divorced and remarried, homosexual and heterosexual partners, young and old, those in the center and those who have been pushed to the side – there are dedicated people who want to put an end to the merger of their parishes into ever larger units. By their personal dedication, by the strength of their baptismal calling, they assist in relieving the priests of their increasing responsibilities in order to continue offering vital services to the people. In parishes that no longer have priests, they are developing creative solutions to ensure the cohesion and the day-to-day management of their parishes. In many cases, this has resulted in sustainable structures and models for the future from which we can learn. There is still much motivation at the base to strive for a renewed Church in the spirit of Jesus.

Pope Francis, we – priests and deacons, ministers and Church citizens, women and men – need you! We appeal to you to clear the way for new forms of parish life, their ministry and management. Let us open the priestly office to everyone who has the charism. Let us develop new management models and forms of pastoral ministry so that parishioners can participate according to their charisms. Let us establish a new culture of co-responsibility and joint decision-making in all structures of our Church. Let us remember how Jesus understood and lived community. God's spirit compels us. Let us be courageous and tackle this together!

Pope Francis, you need vibrant parishes for your vision of Church to come to life. And the parishes need you. We – the priests and deacons, ministers and many engaged Church citizens in parishes around the world – stand ready to share our experiences and ideas and actively support you and the bishops in realizing your vision at the base.

Signed

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