

Letters

to a restless soul

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1. Man becomes a riddle to himself

New York, January 6th, 2011

Dear Ignacio,

You might wonder why I am writing you this letter, but the other day I felt inclined to continue our conversation and to look together for some answers to your perplexing questions. I am not suggesting this is a sure method, but at least by it we might overcome the temptation to hastily find ready answers. And if we fail to find adequate answers, it will not be because we did not accept the challenge and did not take seriously the quest.

I am writing you not only because I am still a romantic professor and find the method of correspondence attractive (and profound), but also because, as I told you, after so many years of teaching hard, now I am taking a sabbatical year in which am going to spend time traveling around. I want to test whether my ideas hold water and that my teaching is not remote from reality. I wonder whether reality appears for everybody on the same horizon.

As you see, my first stop is New York. A place where questions would seem to turn into skyscrapers. Enormous,

bottomless... and we are up here on the scaffolding, like the famous photograph of the workers eating their sandwiches hundreds of meters above the ground. How small and how naïve they are!... And yet they are there! Constructing a building with the desire of reaching the sky (do you remember the day when we discussed in class the pretension that sustained the Tower of Babel?) and... there they are, eating sandwiches.

Well, that is exactly the way I feel now that I am facing your worrisome question. ‘What is life good for?’ – you asked me and you felt pretty good about tackling the big quest that permeates the whole of the history of mankind. And me, after hundreds of lectures in the class room I am staring at the sky skirted by skyscrapers and posing the question together with you: ‘What is life good for?’

What I will recount to you is simply my experience, as it is provoked by your questioning. And this experience – I am even more convinced as years pass by – is given as a gift, a certainty that does not belong to me, but helps to distinguish the sun behind the huge mass of concrete. Dear Ignacio, of what I write, receive what you will as a gift, something I could not enjoy alone. As if sitting on the scaffolding, I am sharing half of my sandwich with you.

Man wonders

The first thing I have to say is that nothing is wrong with you. Don't feel strange about being overwhelmed with a stream of questions you don't know how to answer, while at the same time you also feel an enormous desire to launch yourself into

life impatiently, without waiting to feel secure. Welcome to existence! There is an internal urgency to a quest within us, a need to find out what we live for, to anchor our life to something or to someone who could give meaning to our life. We all have this preoccupation. Indeed the questions you asked me the other day show the signs of authentic concerns. These questions are not only raised by philosophers, wise men or someone who lives an idle life. You and me, just like all other human beings – independently of age, culture, formulation or wording – we all ask these questions.

These concerns stem from our inner life; nobody is putting them in our head or in our heart. They appear because we are seekers by nature; we are made like this. And what is at stake is very serious: the meaning of our life, everything that we are and do.

The questions that burn within us appear when the reality of life impacts upon us in some way: when we are in deep sorrow or receive good news, or when there is a serious decision that we are obliged to take... we are puzzled: why should we do so, what is it good for? When did I realize that it is very urgent to find some answers? The day my younger brother died.

But please don't think I am proposing pain as the only trigger that prompts us to cope with life! It has been my way, but yours will be different. Do you recall any of those moments when you felt overwhelmed? Perhaps by a conversation with a colleague, or the discovery of something small but relevant for that day, or when you had the intuition that some small coincidence was someone else's plan? Have you ever felt your own smallness when contemplating the starry sky on a summer night? Have you ever fallen in love, Ignacio? What do you say about this?

Whenever we come across utter beauty (which is often interwoven with daily routine) the question arises: and me, who am I? Who is this 'I' who is amazed by life? I am the question. I am the desire. And I desire happiness (with all my heart!), I desire beauty, I want justice, I want real things in my life, I want good things to last forever, I want to be loved (always, even when I make mistakes), and I want to love... In short, I want to find the answer to the question of my life in order that my life not be, as the Shakespearian tragic-hero puts it, 'full of sound and fury, signifying nothing...'.¹

Now I remember that day when, at some point in the conversation, I asked you to formulate your yearning and you answered me with the poem of José Hierro:

*I wish you understood me without words.
Without words speak to you, as my people speak to each
[other (...)]*

Ignacio, it is now me who does not have any words but words from the same poem you once offered to me:

*You ask me, my friend, and I do not know what answer
[I should give.
Long ago I learnt deep reasons you do not comprehend.
Reveal them, I'd wish, putting the invisible sun into
[my eyes (...)]
And if I told you now you had to cross lost cities
and cry on their dark streets feeling weak.²*

I only know that my reason is far broader than the words I used to pronounce in class; that my reason and yours are made up of the same things, intellect and heart; and that, just like you, I also yearn for faithful company, for an honest embrace, to find peace in the depth of my soul.

Nothing of this is mere theory or a game. Indeed, think of it: what has been or is your life if you do not respond to this?

‘I confess that I have not lived and don’t live the lack of faith with the despair of a Guerriero or of a Prezzolini (...). Nevertheless, I always felt and I feel it as a profound injustice that deprives my life, now that the time has come to give accounts, of whatever meaning there is. If my destiny is to close my eyes without knowing where I came from and where I am going to and what I came here for, it would have been better not to open them at all. I hope that Cardinal Martini does not consider this confession of mine as something impertinent. At least, I don’t pretend anything else but to declare my failure’.³

You know the author of these words. I recalled them quite often in class. Anyone who takes his life seriously could sign his name to this affirmation of the great historian and journalist, Montanelli. But signing one’s name to these words makes the hand of that soul tremble. Our quest, however, if taken seriously, entails this risk. It is in no way banal. Nobody wants to cross the battlefield of life without finding something at the end.

I expect you will agree with me, that if the question points to Infinity, the response likewise cannot be limited.

Only an ultimate answer can respond to an ultimate question; and these are ultimate questions because there are no questions beyond them. We are looking for the meaning of everything, of life, death, love, suffering, work, loneliness... We can give partial answers that resolve more or less the question, but what our heart really yearns for is a meaning that illuminates the whole: life and death.

Free to escape or to confront

Nevertheless the loom of life has many threads, and not all are simply arranged in the shuttle. Sometimes the thread of freedom comes to make the final design more complex, even if it is true that this is what gives color to the whole. All the looms are not simply determined by the same hand, rather it is freedom that makes it possible for each and everyone of us to take up our particular position before the quest, before the answers that come to us. One can listen to them or cover one's ears, or pretend that nothing ever happens and ignore everything...

From the lectern in the classroom one can see well what I am saying to you: the eyes that do no wonder why wait only for the recess bell... These eyes have already escaped and this student has already given up on life. Without being aware of it, this student has already discovered that existence, his existence, is bottomless: and he has decided to surrender. I have never mentioned it to you, but I am grateful. I thank you because your face was always raised to me like a profound question anticipating the reply of a teacher... I hope I have

not resigned because of the vertigo that overcomes someone standing at the lectern in the loneliness of a silent classroom.⁴

The paradox is that we are born with a thirst, a yearning, we have not chosen, even if we are free to do with it what we want, to confront it or ignore it, to seek to satisfy it once and for all, or merely from time to time. Therefore, we can refuse to search for the meaning, even though it is a difficult choice, since our heart cries out for something else.

In any case, Ignacio, we are not always so obvious. We can be very sophisticated when it comes to surrendering and looking askance at reality. But there are distractions that are subtle and escape us, as there are also timid questions that are masks of the authentic quest for meaning. Especially today, when urgency always seems to get the better of importance, and if somebody proposes another direction, it is immediately dismissed as decadent. Hyperactivity is often respected as an 'honorable' way of avoiding the encounter with oneself and with life. I can tell you this, for I spent years getting lost in what seemed to me 'urgent' for the world.

The profound impulse that prompts us to look for the 'why' of what happens to us is something that is here: a desire, a yearning for something more. Repressing it, ignoring it, and getting 'distracted' and leaving it aside without resolving it can only be to run from it, or better to run from ourselves. For years we fought against the censorship that was imposed on us by the Establishment, but we never realized that the most harmful censorship was provoked by ourselves against our own humanity, a self-censorship that uproots us from our relentless quest. And I hope, too, that this journey I have just

started will help to take away the parachute I kept opening unconsciously because of my vertigo.

The instinct to look up

Your youth obliges me to recall my own and 'to remember things that I'd like to forget' as the poet would say... but it was then that I mentioned earlier, that I sensed the intuition that we are made for something bigger than ourselves and that we have the total freedom to search for it. I became aware that in order to wonder about the meaning of life I had to start with looking up to heaven. regardless of what idea one might have about what is 'up there'. Where else, if not 'up there' could I ever embrace my brother again?

Right now I am in a city thousands of miles from home. And I am experiencing what I studied: each and every one, every human being, with the words of his time according to his resources, from within his own culture and geographic coordinates, each man throughout all of history has expressed, in one form or another, his religious sense. To not recognize this tendency, must be the fault of some huge blockage, some ideological prejudice or a wound in the soul.

A simple look at ancient history clearly showed me how, at different times and in different parts of the Earth, within diverse cultures, the religious questions that characterize all human existence have nevertheless emerged: who am I?; where do I go and where do I come from?; why does evil exist?; what is there after life? These questions are to be

found in the sacred texts of Israel, the writings of Confucius and Lao Tzu, the preaching of Tirthankara and Buddha, in the poems of Homer and in the tragedies of Euripides and Sophocles, and in the philosophical writings of Plato and Aristotle. The answers they gave to these questions were indeed decisive with respect to how they oriented their own existence.

They do not all have a precise idea of God, but virtually all affirm that He exists. I also have had this certainty at a point in my life. And from that certainty I will speak.

The question that you asked without any irony in our last conversation – ‘if God exists, so what?’ – it made me think. Your wit is fantastic! Truly, either God is moved to draw near to man, or that bundle of restlessness intuition we call the human being is hopeless to arrive at God... This might lead you to wonder: ‘Should God not then be able to intervene for our sake in human history in order to give us the answer [to the question that is every human life]? If he could not, what kind of God would he be?’ It does not seem logical to imagine a God that ignores the answers human beings need. Nothing would make much sense. If we are His creation, did He create us for nothing and being hungry for something that did not exist yet? If you reflect on it, the question that best expresses our queries preoccupying our head and heart is this: *Is there a God that intervenes in human affairs?*

On that note, I have to go. I am writing you from the street; it is very cold and the sun is gone. I am sorry to leave you with a question, but that’s life: a question and the time it

will take to answer it... I think your name already indicates the way. 'Ignacio' means *ardent*, the one who is passionate about the goal, the truth... You have all the impulse to discover it.

Get well prepared for your exams.

Regards,

Your old professor

2. Christianity as response?

On my way to São Paulo, Brazil, February 15th, 2011

Dear Ignacio,

I am sorry for having left you with your question for so long. But knowing you, I am sure you did not abandon it to the bottom drawer... Sure you took it with you whenever you left to go out to the bar!

How did your exams go? Now you might have a bit more time, please write and let me know how they went.

I was on the go the whole time I was in New York! How can anyone relax in that city? And if you manage to slow down, how is it possible not to be run over by all the people who do not stop? All jokes aside, I had an interesting month. I could catch up with some of my colleagues, whom I have not seen for long time. Sharing ideas, books, drinking a glass of whisky!... We can never forget the friends with whom we have discovered something important for our lives, Ignacio, and coming back to them is as necessary as breathing.

I am just arriving now by train to São Paulo, Brazil. Traveling by train involves becoming aware again that sometimes the journey is the aim.

Where did we leave off? Yes, well, *is there a God who intervenes in human affairs?*

Look, Ignacio, religions are nothing but proposals for a concrete quest for the ultimate meaning of life. As we said, this search of man is intrinsic to his nature. That is why the history of religions is as old as human existence.

Awareness of this opens up for us a wide range of possibilities. I will be honest with you. I am going to propose a concrete option: Christianity.

There is no need to wait for your next letter for me to anticipate at this point a huge ‘WHY?’, uttered with the vigor you show when you are not willing to take anything for granted (bravo for this!).

The argument I am going to offer you stems from experience. I have already been open to the whole range of what is offered. This statement should not make you skip part of the journey; the intention is only to spare you some of the false starts. (Ignacio, ‘we are like dwarfs lifted up on the shoulders of giants’... allowing oneself to be lifted up, is no lack of rigor but an awareness of one’s own limitation and the necessity of confidence.)

Well, how to start then? You make me return to steps already taken in order to look more carefully at my path. Thank you.

My brother died and I was really angry. He did not deserve to die. Nobody deserves to die, but he least of all.

When he died the only thing I desired was to go after him. It was a difficult time.

My only thought at that moment was that life can not be this. The various religious responses, which I had never taken into consideration before, all started to bloom around me like flowers as I approached them. I dedicated myself to study all of them very eagerly to find out how to cross this abyss, the ditch that separated me from my brother. But I could not find the answer by studying. My study was not life, but an enumeration of dogmas, customs, sayings... just like a catalogue of fancy dresses to meet the Mystery. And then I met Augustine.

Up to this point I had never really engaged with the Catholic faith, it was the faith of my environment and I thought I knew it sufficiently... I was not interested. And yet the life of Augustine challenged me. He did not intend to resolve all my problems, or conceal his own lack of answers, but his way of living and his gospel had something significant to do with what then happened to me. He repeated over and over again that his religion consisted in an encounter with Christ. And that is how a question was raised for me that I had never before asked: who is this Jesus of Nazareth? Responding to this question completely changed my life.

And so the search began. All I am doing now is commending to you the discoveries that I made then.

Polytheistic mythological religions involve narratives of 'apparitions' of a god in human form, as in the mythological stories of Zeus (or Jupiter), the father of the Greco-roman gods, wandering the Earth and sometimes getting mixed with humans

in various actions. Undoubtedly the mythological gods and their deeds stem from the veneration devoted to men of extraordinary human attributes, of the leaders and heroes of ancient peoples. In these cases we have no records of these venerated men claiming for themselves divine honor and adoration; it is rather that they were raised up by the memory of later generations to their altars of glory. Among the Romans, who were singularly civilized people in the modern sense of the word, Julius Caesar and especially Augustus, founder of the Imperial Rome, were elevated to the rank of the gods. Celsus, in his anti-Christian attack, recollects that 'ancient myths attributed a divine origin to Perseus, Amphion, to Aeacus and Minos', and also to 'the Dioscuri, Heracles, Asclepius and Dionysus, which were first men', as well as the divinization of other men who met a violent death. But in all these cases, where the mythical origin may well have been rooted in an ancient human hero or a great man, it was not the men themselves who proclaimed their divinity, but rather over time they were deified by their descendants. In these cases, men became gods by their elevation to the rank of immortals of the heavenly Olympus, yet they bear resemblance more authentically to secondary gods or saints than to God Himself.

It is also known that in primitive religions natural phenomena or mysteries are elevated to the category of mythology. Animism and monism fill the world with spirits of deceased ancestors. It is the same with the great Egyptian religion and the cult of Isis and Osiris, or in Japan with Amaterasu. However, none of these divinities have the historical character of a real man whose earthly life was known, and even less do they present their own actions and words.

Nevertheless, in the history of religions there are some great historical men, whose lives can be situated in their time and whose words, even in a written form could be collected. They are the great founders of existing or disappeared religions. Their names are: Moses, who (with Abraham) was responsible for the organization of the religion of the Hebrew people, who lived in the thirtieth century B.C.; Lao Tzu and Kung-Fu-Tzu (Confucius), who lived in China in the sixth century B.C. and laid down the fundamentals for the philosophical religion of the Tao (the former) and for the organization of a state religion in terms of morality and family (the latter); Buddha, whose name is Siddhārtha Gautama or Śākyamuni, the creator of Buddhism, who lived in India in the sixth or fifth centuries B.C.; and in Persia Zoroaster (or Zarathustra) who was the religious organizer of the ancient religion of the Persians. Following Jesus, in time we find two other men, whose history is well known: Mani in Persia in the second century, and Muhammad, the founder of Islam in the seventh century, whose influence is great even up to the present time.

In any case, none of them intended to be regarded as a god, even though after their life and death some of them, especially Buddha, who gave rise to a cult in which his image is found on altars in the countries in which his teaching became established.

Where should we situate Jesus of Nazareth on this map? For as pope Benedict XVI affirms, 'Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction'.⁵ And this person is Jesus of Nazareth. The only man known to history to whom it is attributed that

he claimed himself the faith that belongs to God. The event of Jesus Christ is utterly unique in the history of mankind. And This makes the event of Jesus Christ a historical problem of enormous human and religious scope. It was precisely this 'claim' that led to his death. And paradoxically, this claim is what rescued many people from absurdity. I am one of them. It is from this experience, but also from my constant restlessness, that I speak.

Christianity: a personal relationship with God

Facing the abyss that opened up in front of me, I did not let a moment pass without trying to come to grips with what I was seeing through my studies, my own ideas and in the teachings of others... yet something was still missing. Only by becoming fully immersed in the form of life that Christians proclaimed, could I finally see further.

Then I understood that there are things in life that one does not get to learn by books, and that one of these things was to find the meaning of my life. I could not pretend to make sense of who I was as if it were a mathematical equation. I couldn't – and this hurt even more – discover why my brother died in the form of an empirical certainty. Only with these people who called themselves Christians did I manage to find a bit of peace. But this peace was not to be found, as had happened in other search attempts, with the censorship of my senses, in the form of a denial of my anxieties. No. It was given through the response of Someone else that was

accepting me as I was, in my present state. The answer was in Jesus of Nazareth.

That, in fact, was the only secret of the Christians. It was not their moral perfection or their virtue, but the fact that they trusted this man who lived two thousand years ago, in such a way that Jesus of Nazareth became really present among them. Thanks to them I discovered that the real difference of Christianity lies not in any religious theory, but the presence of concrete men and women. There is nothing else, there is no trick. It sounds simple. Do you know who lived it with all intensity, Ignacio? Your friend Camus, when he affirmed in *The First Man*: 'There are beings that justify the world, that help to live with their mere presence'.⁶ This friendly presence is more than just a 'persuasive argument', it is a call to the head and the heart.

If you don't search seriously, you won't comprehend

I ask you because I have already asked myself before: if Christ were not true, how could human beings like those who awake in us something so deep and profound, live such a lie?

You know it from your own experience, Ignacio. In order to truly understand a person and make an adequate judgment of your position with respect to him, to accept him in friendship or banish him from our world, it is necessary to comprehend how this person manifests himself in his words and deeds, in what he says about himself. This is valid for all men and women. Once you have then grasped what he is and what he offers to your friendship, you can then say whether

the judgment was correct, whether he really looks as he seemed and whether his friendship fulfills what it promised. This is how love, friendship and faith are born and mature.

This was my journey with Jesus of Nazareth. The first thing I read of Him (I mean in a serious way neither as a ready-made phrase nor from within my ivory tower) was: 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life'²⁷ (Jn 8:12). I had the intuition that in some mysterious way these words came to me and were directed to me. It seemed to me that Jesus was talking about life, about *my* life in a very serious way. Then I discovered that this was not his only proposal; He confirmed it by completely giving himself to death, manifesting in this way the severity and honesty of his offer.

I did not understand anything of this until I stopped making a theory of Christianity and began asking myself how it had something to do with my life. If you approach the Person of Jesus merely with curiosity, without risking anything, you will put yourself in a position that makes it impossible to know Him truly; from this perspective, Ignacio, any action or position you take will be superficial. To understand and assess the claim of Jesus of Nazareth you should take your own life seriously, looking for its meaning, because this is what He talks about and offers with His words and His life.

The train is arriving at the station. Please, think about this. I will write again soon.

Regards,

Your old professor

3. Jesus of Nazareth: myth, relic or truth?

Cairo, March 19th, 2011

Dear Ignacio,

In a couple of hours I will visit the Great Pyramid of Khufu. 4500 years after its construction it is still one of the greatest monuments ever built by human hands. I have to admit I am mostly impressed not so much by its size, but mine next to it.

And now you could tell me that I will use anything to make metaphors (that is a clear consequence of being obsessed with – or just determined by – my work)... but yes, this comparison suits me to continue with what you pointed out in your letter. 'It is not possible', you told me 'it cannot be real, something as extraordinary as the fact that God could dwell with man. Isn't it rather that our desire and our inability to understand life constructs this as a reality? It does not seem rational to claim that divinity could reveal itself as human being'. Indeed: a man less than 2 meters high faced with the 145 meters of a Pyramid...

We have to go step by step. The dimension of the Mystery does not prevent us from approaching the question with an open-

mind. First we have to see whether the claim of Jesus of Nazareth, that He is the God-man, is in fact historical, that is, did He really believe what He said and what is reported to us in the Scriptures. Because if Jesus of Nazareth did not make this claim, if it turns out that the claim is really our claim, a claim He did not assume, then the whole thing is untenable, a pure human allegory.

Where to begin? Let us start with the documents we have: the New Testament. These are stories that tell us about the life of Jesus, what He did and said on His passage through this world. Many people do not accept the historical validity of these texts, although they acknowledge they have a truly extraordinary content with respect to their teachings on life and other aspects. One of these persons happened to be me. My view of science and man made it impossible for me to believe that this all had really happened. Then, as my life was passed, I became aware that many things happen around us, and that many of these things are extraordinary and form part of the Mystery which cannot be explained by a purely scientific gaze. The truth is that if what the New Testament records did not happen, then its content is a pure literary creation and therefore it is nothing that occurred in history and nothing that seeks to have something to do with your life and mine.

For this reason, I propose that we stop and dwell upon the sources that permit us to know the historicity of the life of Jesus of Nazareth and his claim to be God with us. For me this was all a discovery, Ignacio, because I judged for a long time the Catholic faith a kind of folklore tainted with superstition. And yet, I was taught that the documents that they handled had some historical validity.

Well, the bus is going faster than I imagined and before arriving at Giza I want to make you a summary of the documents we have at our disposal to see whether Jesus of Nazareth and his extraordinary life are real, i.e. if they really happened at a concrete moment in history.

I shall begin with the non-Christian sources that mention Jesus. The most important is a Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, who wrote in A.D. 93 the *Antiquities of the Jews*, a history of Israel written to be understood from a Roman perspective. Jesus is cited two times and what the text tells us coincides with some of the most important aspects given also in the Gospels: He was admired by the people, followed by many, he performed miracles, He died on the cross condemned by Pilate, His followers were still living at the time that Josephus composed his book. There are other ancient authors that mention Jesus, too: Mara bar Serapion, Tacitus (56-120), Pliny the Younger (ca. 111), Suetonius (ca. 120), and Lucian of Samosata (ca. 115-120). It is true that there are not too many, but I find sufficient evidence: none of these writers belonged to the Church and so none of them could have benefited in any way from ‘inventing’ the historical existence of Jesus.

The historicity of the New Testament

Let us now turn to the New Testament. The key to establish the historical credibility of a document involves the time that separates the written document from the events it records.

Historians tend to acknowledge that a text is 'historical' if it does not date back more than two generations, between 70-80 years. In that span of time it is almost impossible to implant a fiction-as-history of a major event, either religious or otherwise. The experts offer two arguments:

a) In these two generations there are living witnesses that could disprove the invention of an event, thus making it impossible for the fable to be installed in collective memory.

b) In the case that there is an intention to forge a legend, there must remain some traces of the controversy between its fabricants and those who have not seen what the fabricants pretend to have seen.

The disciples of any teacher are usually the first to be interested that the memory of the teacher should be conserved intact, for it is precisely that content that convinced them. They are much concerned that there should be nothing added or erased concerning the figure of their teacher, and this interest is most intense in the first two generations following the teacher's life. Do you believe that any follower of Gandhi would permit us to divinize him?

The life of Jesus of Nazareth, his word and deeds, and the acts of his followers are collected in what is known today as the New Testament. It is written there that five, fifteen, twenty and thirty years earlier a young Jewish teacher with exceptional personality showed a new vision of God and of human life and captivated many people. It also tells that He claimed himself to be God and that this was the reason why He was crucified, died and buried; and it tells that He was later raised from the dead and

ascended into heaven. On the other hand, it describes how He lived in a certain time and place, under known circumstances, and that He was treated by public authorities known to all as well as by relatives and acquaintances still alive at the time the New Testament was composed. I can now shed some light on the credibility of all these things.

What are the most ancient documents of the New Testament? The Letters of Saint Paul. That is why they possess such a great historical value. The Pauline Epistles were most probably written in the decade between 50-60 (1 Cor, 2 Cor, Rm, Gal, Phil, Col, Eph). His thoughts were already elaborated when he wrote them down: Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the Lord of history who died and was resurrected for us. Paul uses Christological concepts that he does not explain, presuming that the communities to which he writes will be able to understand them. We can easily conclude that if Paul was the author of these concepts, he would have accompanied them with the pertinent explications, for who writes in order not to be understood? That is how we arrive at the observation that there are some concepts rooted in the Christian community prior to the twenty years after the death of Jesus. The establishment of these concepts should be granted the sufficient time necessary to have been formulated and taught, to be explained and repeated to the point of their being fixed as common terms of usage which can be presumed and commonly used as in letters of Paul.

There is another relevant fact: Paul uses some texts written earlier than his letters, texts that would have been circulating among the communities to which he wrote. That is

why we find in the Pauline Epistles sources of an incalculable historical value thanks to their proximity to the events of Jesus Christ. There is a clear date: Jesus died in 30, Paul writes in the Fifties with the certainty of a divine Christ that is the savior of all through His death and resurrection.

This trustworthy source, as you have surely understood well, Ignacio, does not prove either the truth of Jesus' claim nor his condition as incarnated God. We can only arrive to this conviction by faith, that is, from the event in one's life that makes one conscious that all this really has something to do with oneself. This cannot be arrived at by scrutinizing documents. Nevertheless, it should now be clear that the person of Jesus really did exist, and that His claim about himself comes to us from the heart of history.

When I arrived at this conclusion in my life, I became aware of a great paradox: the hypothesis of Christianity as a legend without historical fundamentals seems rational because it avoids reason's confrontation with a mystery, but this hypothesis does not hold water against the proof of history, that is, it is less reasonable. Although the really problematic point here is not so much the historical existence of Jesus, but the historicity of his claim. The denial that in the mind and heart of Jesus existed the claim of being God for us, on the one hand, and the affirmation, on the other, that some years later somebody – Paul and some anonymous communities – put these things into Jesus' mouth and then succeeded to deceive the world, this is a greater credulity than that of a faith that trusts the historical data that opens to the Mystery of a presence that goes beyond reason without annihilate it in any moment.

The Gospels and their sources

With respect to the Gospels, we can affirm that the current version is a translation or a second modified edition of an original, redacted between the end of the Sixties and the Nineties. The Gospels also use sources that were written between ten and fifty years after the narrated events, principally the stories of the passion date back to the first ten years of Christianity. The events were thus narrated in less than two generations after the death of Christ, and in fact the Apocryphal Gospels and other text with fantastic additions redacted from other religions (the Gnostic apocrypha, for example) do not start to appear until much later, after the Nineties.

‘The research of the last one and a half centuries has identified beyond doubt the source used by Luke to compose his Gospel as source Q and the Gospel of Mark, along with some other sources proper to Luke himself. These sources must have existed in Greek before the Forties and Fifties. By carefully examining these sources from the perspective of a bilingual philology it becomes evident that the three sources used to complete the public ministry of Jesus, his passion and his resurrection were composed originally in Aramaic. They all stem therefore for Christians of Aramaic tongue, i.e. from Palestinians or people from a region very close by, which had not yet assimilated the Greek language. We must therefore

conclude that at least some of the Semitic origins of Luke's sources were written in the first decade after the death of Jesus, between A.D. 30 and 40'.⁸

On the other hand, to suppose within the Hebrew context that the identity of a man could have been transformed to be identified with YHWH, and adored as such, and not at the end of a long series of generations but within mere years of his scandalous death, betrays a complete lack of any knowledge of the Jewish people. In several parts of Empire, the deification of a creature was something more or less simple, but there was one exception where this was impossible: among the Jews. They adored and worshiped YHWH, the one God, whose figure could not be represented, whose name could not even be uttered. To identify a man with YHWH, whoever he was, would have been considered by the Jews the greatest sacrilege ever, and in fact it still is.

The Gospels are not a biography of Jesus

By insisting on the historicity of the texts of the New Testament I do not want to give you the impression that these texts should be considered 'history' in the modern sense of the word, Ignacio. They are not biographical texts, they are historical texts. They lack aspects of historical accuracy, but not historical reality. We have seen this often in class.

A modern biography has its own exigencies with respect to the life of the person in question: chronological

precision, documentation of the acts and the cultural and social context in which the life of the character took place. The Gospels lack all these elements essential for a modern biography. Practically the whole childhood, adolescence and youth of Jesus is missing; there is no information about relevant personalities that appear in the story like Herod, Pilate, Caiaphas or John the Baptist; there is just a bit or even no information concerning the social and religious situation in Palestine; content of the story seems to be formed by the unity of different episodes of which only a small number is localized temporally and geographically. They are also not meticulous descriptions of what Jesus said or did; they would not pass the test of what counts today as 'biography'.

Obviously the Gospels are truly extraordinary pieces of literature, both for the uniqueness of the main character and the exceptional intention of the authors who wrote these texts. These characteristics mark the form of the narration but they do not take away its historical validity. It is important that you see this in order to avoid confusion and so that we can also go on with our dialogue. This is my warning for you: the demonstration of the historicity of Jesus Christ's claim does not prove its truth. This leap must happen in the heart and in the head of each one of us.

What does this have to do with my life? With yours? With this thirst that I was talking to you about from New York? The thirst that every man has to know why he is here?... I know that you will reach a satisfactory conclusion if you think about it, if you act as you always shown me you do: with a broad and profound vision of reality, without taking

anything for granted, but also without considering anything as being *a priori* suspicious or false.

Why, if two thousand years ago God indeed spoke to man, why shouldn't an echo of this conversation come so far that it even reaches us?

We have arrived already. Now we have to cross some more dunes in order to contemplate the Great Pyramid of Giza... I think that this is going to help me to better understand the importance of the disproportion of this work compared with its author: how is it possible that something like this would emerge in the middle of nowhere?

Your old professor

4. The unprecedented claim of Jesus

Tokyo, April 7th, 2011

Dear Ignacio,

I have arrived on the other side of the world. If my objective with this flight was to discover that all men on Earth have the same desire and the same hope, this land is a real challenge to this! For Japanese people seem to hide some secret that they don't want to share with the rest of us... I still have a great deal to learn and there is a lot to discover in this part of the world.

This brings me to question myself as to whether this experience I was telling you about – the experience of feeling that God extends a ladder to humans, like the one that helped me get out of the pit I found myself in – could be universal. Could it have come so far that it reaches these people in this land – one that seems so different than mine? I have an intuition, Ignacio, that the response again can't be found so much in a theoretical argumentation or in a sociological thesis... but rather in the subject we are studying, that is, in the plan and claim of Jesus of Nazareth. To be more precise, I understand power and possibility

stemming from the One who claims to be God and not from human efforts. What do you think?

You asked me about what it was that I found in the Gospels that led me to believe that Jesus was or wanted to be God. Well, I confess to you that this question is one with which I have really wrestled. As I have told you, I have studied many religions, many moral and mystical viewpoints... I was fully immersed myself in the life of the great spiritual leaders in order to find out whether they had discovered the meaning of evil and suffering... and in this intellectual itinerary I did not meet any figure that had or manifested a relationship with God like Jesus of Nazareth. Let me relate to you some of these characteristics that surprised me when they were explained me, so that you can get the idea of what I am talking about.

Jesus has, and offers, a special relationship with God

Jesus prepared His followers by teaching them that the word *God* and especially the word *Father*, when pronounced by Him, had a new meaning. Applying the word 'Father' to God must have caused amazement, saying *Abba*, i.e. 'my father', 'daddy', 'dad' could even scandalize the audience.

In a text of Jeremiah it is written that God expects to be called Father: 'And I thought you would call me, My Father' (cf. Jer 3:19). It is like a prophecy that will be fulfilled in the messianic times. Jesus of Nazareth made it his own when he spoke of Himself as somebody who 'knows the Father'. Jesus Christ 'knows the Father' so profoundly that He came 'to

make His name known to those whom the Father has given Him from the world' (cf. Jn 17:6). A unique moment of this revelation of the Father constitutes the response that Jesus gives to His disciples when He is asked: 'Lord, teach us to pray' (Lk 11:1), and He gives them the prayer that starts with the words 'Our Father' (Mt 6:9-13).

Talking with his disciples and His opponents: 'The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me' (Jn 5:36). If we ask Jesus about what sustains Him in life, He would answer the same as to His disciples: 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work' (Jn 4:34). Indeed, only One who considers himself the Son of God, in the real sense of the word, could say this of Himself and turn to God as a real Father.

Are you not surprised by the familiarity of Jesus with God in these lines which I have just quoted to you? Don't you ask yourself as His contemporaries did: but, who is this man? I have to admit, Ignacio, that I keep doing so. And I keep asking myself whenever I read a fragment of the Gospels, who is this that speaks about God like this, who says such extraordinary things in such simple terms? Is it possible that God is really as He claims He is and that He is so close? Do we really have this Father in Heaven and on Earth? Jesus talks with such naturalness and seriousness about this God who informs us about our lives by telling us why and what we were born for! He shows us God as Father so that we petition Him as a Father and experience his answer as a Father who is close to us.

But how can I convey this to you, Ignacio, if not by telling you my own experience? How else could you demonstrate to me the

love of your parents, for example, or the intimacy of a friendship? And, is this – what you can only show me through what you are – any less real than the science that we studied together?

Jesus frees us from the guilt that is a heavy burden

At that point in my life, when I devoured those texts looking for an answer, the most moving discovery for me was finding out that Jesus forgives sins. What is this? At the beginning I did not even want to talk about sin and even less did I want to talk about it with others. Who could tell me – *me!* – what was wrong and what was right? Who could advise me how I should behave without having suffered what I suffered? And yet, I began to realize that this Jesus Christ did not talk about moral improvements, about praiseworthy behavior... but rather of an obscurity that would not let me breathe. He was talking about my burden; about my desire to free myself... and this began to interest me.

Precisely this affirmation reflects with utmost clarity the power that Jesus without hesitation claims to possess. This is an example of what He says: ‘the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins’ (Mk 2:10). He affirms this in Capernaum when he is lead to a paralyzed person and He heals him. Jesus tells him: ‘Son, your sins are forgiven’ (Mk 2:5). The scribes who are sitting there think in their heart: ‘Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ (Mk 2:7). And Jesus, with his knowledge of their spirit, answers them: ‘Why do you raise such questions in your hearts?

Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, “Your sins are forgiven”, or to say, “Stand up and take your mat and walk”? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins – he said to the paralytic – I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home’ (Mk 2:8-11). The people who witness the miracle, full of admiration, give glory to God, saying: ‘We have never seen anything like this’ (Mk 2:12).

Let us reflect on the development of these events! The miracle of the healing appears as the confirmation of Jesus’ claim. On the other hand, do not forget the scandal of some of those present, repeatedly, whenever Jesus is talking about the forgiveness of sins, as when He sits down to eat with a Pharisee and says to a woman: ‘Your sins are forgiven’ (Lk 7:48). There is an immediate reaction from the guests: ‘But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?”’ (Lk 7:49).

The fact is that this sin of which Jesus speaks is what interested me. Not the one I designed in my mind or the one which I was warned about by others, but rather in this profound guilt, this blindness that did not let me see how and where to get to the goodness of things, of my life and the life of those whom I love... in this wanting to be happy despite everything and not being able to do so by myself. And Jesus of Nazareth seemed to talk about this, seemed to know the profound disappointment that I had concerning myself, the wall that was raised around me made of all that I was not able to change.

I don’t know whether you have ever experienced this devastating loneliness that I am talking about, Ignacio, but I am sure that at some point it was difficult for you to look

in the mirror because of a pain that you had caused someone or the necessary and urgent good that you omitted to do... and I am sure that at that moment you desired with all your might that somebody would tell you that he could amend it, that he could reach the goodness of things by passing through the evil you left there; that you are not an impediment to the construction of a beautiful life. And this, Ignacio, to experience *this*, means being saved. And I have only lived this through knowing and believing in this Christ.

Is not it funny? I needed to be thousands of miles away from you to tell you something that I could have talked about with you any day when, after having finished class, we decided to continue our conversation in the open air. And even so, the journey is not incidental and it also helps me to better understand your question, and the profound yearning of your words... and thus to better comprehend myself and to better offer you my experience.

Before Him, we are prompted to make a decision

We have already talked about Jesus' relationship with God and His aspiration to save man from guilt. I also would like you to consider the explicit invitation that Jesus makes to His disciples: come and you will see, follow me, 'believe in God, believe also in me' (Jn 14:1). Who if not God could make such a radical appeal?

On the one hand Jesus asks for faith, on the other hand we see that some of the men that follow Him leave everything to go after Him. Let us recall the cases reported by the Evangelists:

‘Another of his disciples said to him, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father”. But Jesus said to him, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead”’ (Mt 8:21-22). This is a drastic way to say: leave everything immediately because of me. At another occasion when passing by the table of the tax-collectors He spoke to Matthew by almost giving Him an order: ‘Follow me. And he got up and followed him’ (Mt 9:9).

Following Jesus not only means leaving our professions and breaking ties with the world, but also putting some space between ourselves and the irritations of our life or even giving our property to the poor. Many do not limit themselves to simply accepting that ‘follow me’, but like Philip of Bethsaida, feel the need to communicate this conviction of having found the Messiah to the others (Jn 1:43).

There is no doubt that Peter and the Apostles considered and accepted the call of Jesus as a total giving away of themselves and their material possessions in order to announce the Kingdom of God. Jesus gave Himself totally to them and the right response is to follow Him. They themselves are going to remind Jesus with the words of Peter: ‘Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?’ (Mt 19:27). And Jesus himself responds to Peter with all strength: ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life’ (Lk 18:29-30).

But there is no room for deception, Ignacio: Jesus does not hide from anybody that following Him implies sacrifice, and sometimes even the supreme sacrifice. Indeed, He tells to

his disciples: 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it' (Mt 16:24-25). Mark underlines that Jesus and His Apostles summoned a crowd and told them about the renouncement He requires of whoever wants to follow Him: take up the cross and lose your life 'for my sake, and for the sake of the Gospel' (Mk 8:34-35). Nevertheless, at the same time Jesus proclaims the beatitude of all who are persecuted 'on account of the Son of Man' (Lk 6:22): 'Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you' (Mt 5:12).

Who is this that makes such extreme proposals, ones which are, at the same time, so close to what the human heart hopes for? Only the Son of Man, aware of being the Son of God, could talk like this. In this sense it is understood by the Apostles and the disciples who gave us his revelation and his message. And it was in this sense that I understood Him, as well. I kept on asking myself: who is this that calls me to put Him in the center of my life, calls me to follow Him, offers me His company and provides me with such a special relationship to God?

I pass the torch over to you, Ignacio. Not to search is tantamount to renouncing life itself. And to accept a prejudice as a response is like refusing to even enter the battlefield. Look for your own response in all this, whatever it should be, it should be yours!

Your old professor

5. Is it reasonable to believe this?

Sydney, May 18th, 2011

Dear Ignacio,

I am still on my trip, and keeping in mind the urgency of your concerns. Your last letter read like an existential questionnaire! You take life very seriously. None of your questions were merely rhetorical, they stared at me with waiting eyes... but don't forget, I am not the answer. I can only accompany you in your journey.

Ah, yes, I am already in Australia. I arrived some days ago to Sydney. The cold season of the year will start shortly, but the beaches still are packed with people wind-surfing and whale watching. This part of the world is like a *collage* of humanity, a bit of the United Kingdom with some oriental flavor... and at the same time unique like every human being.

You queried me about certainties. How can I obtain proof of something? What is the theoretical reasoning? This is not the point, Ignacio. The point is rather to acknowledge that in front of a historical fact that calls everybody to take a position, reason has its own way, its own itinerary, but it is

not a trajectory that will arrive at the conclusion of the truth of faith in a way like one would conclude from reasoning or from an argumentation. At most it comes to an abyss before which it must leap, with a leap that is impossible without the mystery of freedom. Confronted with this abyss we are not supposed to 'conclude' the truth about the claim of Jesus, but instead we ought to ask for the help of this Mystery.

The point is that reason also must here take its own trajectory of investigation, but in a way far from the kind of rationalism that would only accept as truth what is 'visible' to reason. Thus, I refer here to a reason that is integrated into the humanity of the man who searches. That is why it is important to understand that the type of certainty one might obtain with respect to the figure of Jesus of Nazareth is not the fruit of a logical or deductive process, but a possible, an existential certainty that is called faith.

Can one have certainty about Jesus Christ?

The exceptional status of the figure of Jesus of Nazareth is beyond us. On the one hand Jesus attracts us because His teaching corresponds to the profound yearning for happiness that is at the bottom of our hearts. But, on the other hand, He scares us when He demands for Himself all that is owed to God and when He says that He Himself is God and has come to save us. We think: 'Good grief! Just what we need! Someone coming to make our life more complicated, as if our lives were not sufficiently confused already'. Even though

at the same time we have an intuition that we will really be in trouble if someone does not come to save us, and that this someone cannot save us if he is someone just like us. Either this someone will comprehend life in its totality from within or we are quite lost.

In order to face this point I suggest that we concentrate on how Jesus lived this in his life and what He did to make Himself known as who He really was. ‘The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” He said to them, “Come and see”. They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon’ (Jn 1:35-39).

The Evangelist does not tell us all of what Jesus revealed to them that day they spent together. But the potency of his person must have been of a special magnitude. The certainty about Jesus Christ stems from an encounter. An encounter that is so much different from any other that, even years after the event, John remembers it as if it had happened just now. *It was the tenth hour*. Do you remember Lorca’s poem, the one we studied in class? It was around five in the evening – says the poet – when his friend passed away. He keeps repeating it again and again as if this mantra helped him to understand the Mystery... What is important in life is an event and not an idea. What happens to us, what marks us, happens at a

certain moment of history. This is what is celebrated by any Christian: that he has met Christ.

Let us turn back to the Gospel, to what happened to the two men, John and Andrew. What was necessary for them in order to follow Him and become his disciples? Nothing but being a human with an awakened sense of humanity, a humble heart to recognize God in the form of a response, a necessity recognized, accepted and put into action. The disciples search, and in Jesus they find the response they are seeking. Jesus cannot respond to our desire for happiness if we decide in advance that it is impossible for God to accompany us on the way. Neither John, nor Andrew, nor the rest of the disciples had anything to loose by being on the side of Jesus. They were waiting for the coming of the Messiah and, when He arrived, they went with Him. It is true that while following Him they had moments in which they understood nothing. 'Do you also wish to go away?...' Jesus asked them when they did not understand Him, when they were overwhelmed; but the certainty of the encounter has left its trace in a more profound way than any of their doubts and insecurities. *Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life...* is tantamount to saying: 'I have not found anything apart from you that affirms my life is something worth living'. These words are still real today. And I am one of those, Ignacio, who think in this way.

Jesus did not propose to his first disciples a theory, a new philosophy of life. He invited them to be with Him, simply and fully. Insofar as the disciples shared their life with Him, His divinity became evident. How can we be sure of the truth of Jesus Christ in the actual world? 'Come and see'.

To this invitation humans of every epoch have to respond, starting with the first disciples until today. We can know who is Jesus Christ insofar we share our lives with Him and stay with Him, experiencing what He effects in our lives when given permission to enter into them. Without our 'Yes', He can neither act by manifesting His power or expressing His divinity. Jesus works according to our freedom.

What is more, we are free only when we encounter a 'you' to respond to. The road to happiness starts with the encounter of Jesus Christ who calls, 'follow me'. We discover that we are being transformed from a seeker into one who is 'being found'. In the same way as the disciples began to see the divinity of Jesus through spending time with Him, for us, in the twenty-first century, the form of knowledge remains the same. The method is that of true friendship: being among friends. The knowledge of God and its certainty starts with experience, with what we see and touch and therefore it is an objective knowledge of reality; of the reality of a relationship with someone. Do I make myself understood? I have described to you this friendship, the way I discovered it and live it out every day, Ignacio.

As you see, this road to certainty surpasses the limits of reason. If we could fully comprehend God, He would not be the Mystery, He would no longer be ineffable. In order to understand one hundred percent the thoughts of God we should be identical to Him. You will see that by realizing this you spare a lot of skepticism that does not lead us anywhere. I'd like to insist on this.

The Mystery surpasses reason, but does not annihilate it

The characteristic proper to the Mystery is precisely that it seduces me, not in virtue of a logical deduction, but as a reality that intervenes to change the exigency of my judgment and rationality and that, nevertheless, imposes itself on me as something supremely real and rational. It is so real that it gets proposed in a way that I cannot reject no matter how much I try to do so. Jesus Christ exceeds my intellectual capacities. He disorients my rationality; His presence confuses the attitudes of my intelligence. That is why I experience resistance to believe in Him.

It is still an even greater problem for somebody wanting to live a quite life, for if Jesus Christ did not exist or if I could avoid facing the fact, I would be calmer. You do understand me, don't you? If He did not exist, that would relieve for me the tension of having to face what I am and live with this Presence so real and superior, so good and so full. I would not have to account for everything – I do not refer here to moral but rather to existential accounts – faced with the One who claims to be the meaning of my life. The argument of those who claim that Christianity censures reality is false; Christianity does not satisfy us with empty consolations in order to avoid life. I am telling you with all certainty, Ignacio, because it was me who thought this and so it is me who has been struck and fallen from the horse. Life is not easy believing in Christ, but I can affirm that nothing is so worthwhile.

I want to specify the meaning of the word *mystery* in the language of religion in order that you can get a better idea of what I am referring to. We are used to calling *mystery* whatever we don't understand, problems without a known solution. Properly speaking, however, not all questions that do not have solutions or are incomprehensible are mysteries. An enigma is not a mystery. An enigma is rather a question without a solution, but within a horizon where it is reasonable to find a solution. The treatment for tuberculosis was an enigma but it is not anymore; the treatment for cancer is an enigma that we hope will disappear one day thanks to developments in oncology.

On the other hand: what am I doing with my life? Why has life been given to me? – It is something that we do not know and we are not going to succeed in knowing from our own resources. We have a clear intuition that the response to such a question transcend us, that it is 'beyond', and that is the way we approach the religious mystery. The treatment for cancer has not arrived yet. We do not know how the universe was formed... Do you see now to what extent the question of mystery is different from that of enigma? The former concerns the meaning of our life, while the doesn't, despite its importance for medicine or astronomy. The enigma is something that Sherlock Holmes would resolve, while *mystery* is something that moved Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Faith does not consist simply in praying but rather in facing the Mystery. It appears when we are looking for something or Someone in order provide the key to our existence.⁹ This is why, in talking about the mystery of faith,

one has to understand what is being said. That is why I write to you about the Mystery of Christ.

The Mystery is incomprehensible because it is beyond our capacity of understanding, it is transcendent. It is reasonable and not irrational to accept it. Irrational would be accepting as true contradictory or ridiculous things (a square circle, or saying that two plus two is five), but it is not irrational to accept as real the fragment of the Mystery that we can know, even while the fullness of the Mystery lies beyond our grasp. Comprehending the exceptional nature of the person of Jesus and going deep into the verification of the truth of everything He claims to be an offer, this constitutes a challenge for the head and the heart; even if they are overwhelmed by what is before them, nevertheless, they are not annihilated, but invited to a new form of openness.

You asked me how to obtain a proof, but after all these thoughts I can only respond you that the single possible 'verification' for our faith resides in readiness to compare whether what is offered by the Mystery corresponds to the profound hunger of our heart. Don't you think that this is the most fascinating thing of all?

Next month I am going to travel to Jerusalem, the centre of the Mystery. Write me before then so that I can keep going accompanied by your questions.

How are you facing the end of term?

Your old professor

6. Why do they say that He is resurrected?

Jerusalem, June 29th, 2011

Dear Ignacio,

I arrived to what seems to me the axis of the world, the centre of Earth, because if God revealed Himself to men, if God became a man and this happened here, then there is no place more important. Don't you think so? This place is also the melting pot of humanity: the three great monotheist religions consider it as their own (so much so that sometimes they do not understand that it is difficult to determinate to whom the sacred places belong, you know what I mean, don't you?). I am sending you these lines from the place that witnessed the Mystery and where, one day, life turned into a feast.

I waited until I was here before writing you this letter. In this letter I want to tell you about the resurrection of Jesus. Since the last time I wrote you, you wrote of your difficulty in incorporating this event into your life. You tell me that reading my words over and over again, you feel kind of dizzy as if this God who became a man also wanted to establish a conversation with you, as if everything that

I told you corresponded in some form to your life, to your studies, to your desires. Perhaps of all the answers you seek, this will be at once the most outrageous and the most reasonable... for you the problem is this: how could it be possible that Jesus is both still alive and that even now He is with me?

Resurrection is the key, Ignacio. Encountering Christ is possible for us today only if He really is resurrected and alive, here and now. This has been fully experienced by those who followed Him.

Make an effort to contemplate it! Imagine the scene after the death of Christ! The 14th day of the Jewish month, Nisan, after the rage and blood, one could hear only the crushing noise of the stone rolling to close the sepulcher. While the darkness spread out, the last women returned to their homes. Pain, shame, desolation, failure... What remained apart from the broken body of a dead man? Solitude.

Where now are the people who said 'we are going to die with you, if necessary'? Judas, the betrayer, committed suicide. Peter, filled with fear, denied Him three times. The rest scattered and hid because all that they believed in was finished and the world had witnessed it. Their Lord had just died like a criminal. The Saturday of solitude starts in the sepulcher and the despair spreads out through the hearts of the disciples. It will be a day of silence and sadness in front of the tomb where nobody could have hoped or imagined what would happen three days later.

It is not the idea that failed, Ignacio, but a life full of signs that referred to God. It was the failure of each and every

life that decided to leave everything behind and follow Him. The Person who was considered as the promise of their life, now nourished worms for He had been taken away by death just like any other man.

Two days later these same men, fearful and desolated, will be radically changed. They will be filled with joy and happiness. What is happening to them? They will tell each other that Christ is resurrected, that He defeated death and that He demonstrated once and all that is He is God, whom they have seen, and that they have eaten with Him and talked to Him, without fear, fully rejoicing and transformed. They pass from despair to trust, from confusion to certainty, from being cowards to being of an iron will. And they do it in Jerusalem, close to the Jewish and Roman authorities that condemned and killed Christ only two days before, in front of the crowd that preferred Barabbas to Jesus, in front of everybody that believed that they were finished for ever with this group of 'Nazarenes'.

If we could ask the disciples, they would respond without batting an eyelid: 'What happened was that Jesus was resurrected'. Without much fuss, in the direct style of someone who bore witness to an event and so tells it like it was. All of a sudden the sepulcher is forgotten, nobody venerates the dead person. The tomb of the beloved master who died accused of blasphemy is no longer visited. Why? Because there is no tomb, there is no body.

Not even fifteen years passed after the death of Jesus and there were already solid written traditions which show how well rooted and extended was the conviction that Jesus had

been resurrected. I will quote here the text of Saint Paul so that you can see what these people went through:

‘For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the Apostles. Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me’ (1 Cor 15:3-8).

Faced with this event, there are some possibilities that come to mind:

- a) It is a lie; the disciples lied and invented everything.
- b) The disciples deceived themselves and they had hallucinations.
- c) It is a legend put together by the first Christians based on historical events to which they kept on adding things till they ended up with the myth of resurrection.
- d) It must be true; these stories simply tell what happened. That would not constitute a ‘proof’ of resurrection and even less the divinity of Jesus, but a potent appeal to take a position before the events. A call to the head and the heart that feel questioned.

The third opinion, I think, raises the same issue that we clarified before concerning the historicity of the Gospels; and concerning the fourth one you can freely decide about its validity thus, I restrict myself to the first two questions.

a) Was it invented by the first Christians?

Think about it! Such a big lie is really untenable. In the first place because there are no trustworthy witnesses to it. The first people to see the resurrected God are women: Mary Magdalene, Mary of Cleophas and Mary (mother of James the Less and Joseph), Salome and Joanna and more. This is how it appears in the Gospels written in a simple style of somebody who collected immediate testimonies. Women giving a testimony while the men are full of fear and hide themselves. I always thought that if the resurrection is true, God certainly does not know too much about marketing. It is enough to read the Gospel of Luke 24:11: '[They] told this to the Apostles [the empty sepulchral and the encounter with the resurrected Jesus]. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them'. Sure they did not! They thought it was crazy and did not believe it. The contemporary thinking and attitude is very well depicted by Flavius Josephus in his *Antiquities of Jews*: 'But let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex'. Celsus the great dialectical adversary of Christianity of the second century affirmed: 'Galileans believe in a resurrection witnessed to by some hysterical women'.

In the final analysis, Ignacio, it would not have been easy for the first Christian communities to accept that the original witnesses to the living Christ were given by women, for this would have gone against their world view. Giving so much importance concerning the stories of Jesus' resurrection to female witnesses certainly would not have helped to assure their credibility. The inventor of a lie, trying to make the lie credible, would never try to base it on witnesses like these.

Secondly, it is untenable because the invented 'story' is not believable: supposedly ready to invent a story, the first Christians should have come up with something that could have been believed and that would correspond to the Jewish mentality. A resurrection as they tell it does not fit in their Semitic thinking. Within Judaism, the groups that believed in resurrection (not all did so) expected a universal resurrection at the end of time that would begin with the coming and work of the anticipated Messiah. The fact that Jesus was resurrected alone and before the end of time was something impossible to admit and even more so to imagine.

The Apostles would not have interpreted their 'visions' as resurrection. Because the only idea that they could have was of a body that returns to the same life that it had before, like Lazarus or the son of the widow of Nain or Jairus' daughter or what the prophet Elisha did, but a human body that appears and disappears, enters and leaves closed rooms, eats food, a body that one can touch... these they wouldn't have ever thought of.

How would the enemies of Jesus react when they came face to face with the public claim that Jesus was assassinated

and therefore his enemies were murderers? The enemies of Jesus were not playing games, and whoever held that Jesus now still lived, risked the same fate as their teacher. Moreover, the question for them was not only to believe it but also to make others believe. This faith demanded from them a radical devotion of their life to this event, i.e. to Jesus. The only principal 'argument' that they had was that even though Jesus died in the manner he did, He was now resurrected. Do you really think they expected to convince anybody? How could they come up with such an 'outrageous idea' without having touched Him with their own hands?

The hypothesis of the lie becomes even less sustainable if we see the reaction of Jesus' enemies, those who condemned and executed Him. If the Apostles were lying, they were being really annoying. The high priest together with the full Sanhedrin decided to give them a warning: 'We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us' (Acts 5:28). Nothing is easier than presenting the dead body or the guards injured when the body was stolen. The fact that they didn't do this has only one explanation: there was no corpse, the sepulcher was empty. And the empty sepulcher presents only two possibilities: either somebody had stolen the body or Christ resurrected.

Let us see then: if the body of Christ was stolen, who did it? It seems clear that it was done neither by the Jews nor by the Romans. Why would they get themselves into such trouble, especially with all the preoccupying movement and the suspicious group around the deceased?

Suppose that some brazen followers of the deceased won the battle against some professional soldiers that were put there on the request of the Jewish authorities in order to avoid such a stealing, wouldn't there have been some noise of struggle in the silent daybreak of Jerusalem full of pilgrims? What about the scandal that would have been caused by the fact that some Jewish people confronted the Roman soldiers and defeated them? Where are the guards wounded or killed in the skirmish? There is nothing else to do but to present them to the people to prove theft.

The only thing that is left for us is to think that the body was stolen while the guards were sleeping... It is clear that according to the Roman military code of honor, a Roman soldier who would fall asleep during his guard was supposed to be clubbed to death or burnt alive on the spot. And the guards were asleep? In a mission that was not routine, but expressly demanded in the face of a certain danger?

And if the Apostles indeed stole the body and then walked around Jerusalem talking about the dead man, telling that the authorities were responsible for this death... How could it be that no one accused them of desecrating a grave and steal a corpse?

There are many questions, Ignacio, and as you can see all are very pertinent, very concrete and solid. Every man of every age must face them without silencing his reason, and he should consider all the possibilities, for the Truth of what we talked about in previous letters depends on this fact.

I faced them with all my efforts. My brother passed away and if a man came into this world and promised us life,

I was certainly interested in it. This saved me from my despair and my desolation. But it had to be true and real... I was not ready to trust a lie, because sooner or later the fall will come and it will be even more painful. The only thing I can offer you is my own experience, Ignacio.

In the case that the disciples had stolen the corpse of Jesus, why would they turn to the Hypothesis of the resurrection in order to explain His disappearance? They could have explained it along the lines of the Jewish concept of a corporal rapture to heaven. That is how the Jewish tradition tells the story concerning some of the characters like Enoch, Elijah, Ezra and Baruch. The Apostles, nevertheless, in spite of having been denounced as false and suspected to be thieves, insisted again and again that Jesus disappeared from the sepulcher and resurrected from the dead. The empty tomb was not a sufficient proof of resurrection, but there was no other justification on the side of Jesus' followers but their insistence on that particular affirmation as a sign of loyalty to what seems to have really happened.

b) Is it possible that the disciples really deceived themselves?

This is the next question that I wanted to show you. We can think that the disciples – being stricken by the total failure of their Master, destroyed emotionally and influenced by the words of Jesus – had hallucinations. This is tantamount to saying that somebody can talk to the dead. More than one scholar has formulated this hypothesis. The psychological studies reveal that a hallucination never goes together with the doubt concerning what one believes he has seen. The one who

hallucinates does not doubt. Nevertheless the protagonist of the alleged hallucinations doubted and at some occasions did not recognized Jesus at first sight.

Pathological hallucinations are progressive up to the point of destroying the entire personality if not properly treated, but this particular one started and finished in forty days. Moreover, one should talk about a collective hallucination (Mary Magdalena, the eleven in the cenacle, the two of Emmaus, the five hundred, Peter, James...), and this type of hallucination is not possible without something that would bring it about.

That behavior was very unusual of the witnesses. The authorities of Sanhedrin did not treat them like madmen, something that would have been easy to demonstrate with other features of their apparent delirious hallucinations. If they hallucinated and expanded a similar delirium, the Jewish or Roman authorities could have easily stopped the deception by showing the corpse.

The alleged hallucination would explain only the stories of the appearances posterior to the death, but it would not shed any light on the empty tomb, the stone of the sepulcher rolled away or the lost of the body.

Nobody has ever given any alternative explication of the Resurrection of Jesus that would explain everything in a satisfactory manner, Ignacio. This does not mean that the resurrection is proven, but rather that one has to consider the possibility that it has really happened and, taking this possibility into account without silencing reason, one has also

to evaluate whether it is possible that this event that provoked such a reaction in the followers could be quite meaningful to oneself. The steps that I am showing you are the steps that I followed, but each will have his own way. There is no proof concerning Jesus Christ that coerces the freedom of the person contemplating Him. The Jewish professor of history of the Second Temple of the University of Jerusalem, David Flusser (I have talked about him in class, do you remember?) based on 1 Cor 15:3-8 affirms the following: 'We don't have any motive for questioning that the Crucified appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve and then to five hundred brothers at the same time... and then to James; and then to all of the Apostles and finally to Paul on the road to Damascus'.¹⁰

Death is not an 'issue', Ignacio, it forms a part of our lives. If one thinks about it abstractly, making theories of it, one can say many different things, some sensible, others less so. But when it touches our lives or someone we love, it introduces us to the mystery of our existence.

For me it was the death of my brother that served as an entrance to the Mystery of Jesus of Nazareth. Death was not a fact in my life any more, and started to be a great riddle. I realized that if everything finishes there, life is one thing, if not, it is something else. If someone has overcome the power of death, and death no longer has the last word, then life changes radically. And at that point I was only interested in one thing: embracing again my brother. I know now that behind this legitimate desire there was something more: the necessity that my life and the life of all my beloved ones should have a harbor where they can safely arrive.

The Gospels contain a story that changes everything. The story is direct and to the point: the Crucified was found alive after his death, not as a revival of a Jesus who was before, but as one who already lives in a new world in which there is neither death nor tears. I was overwhelmed by the disproportion between the event and the reaction that it caused in its witnesses. People that lived the event of the death and the burial of their Master with such fear were able to go into the streets shouting some hours later that He was alive and that everything made sense, at least for them. And for me? – I asked myself, did it make sense for me? I wondered and I still wonder as I look at this holy land that bore witness to what sustains me.

I wish you were here, Ignacio.

Regards,

Your old professor

7. What does the Church have to do with all this?

Rome, July 31st, 2011

Dear Ignacio,

I am now so close to home. Really I feel like I am already at home. I am in Rome. This city is chaotic and profoundly beautiful. I have been here many times and I always discover it afresh. Its streets are full of life: the peeling walls don't need to be painted; the exaggerated gestures of people not meaning to be angry; no one obeys traffic signals because there is a kind of human understanding that there is not need for machines; churches wide open as if they formed part of the plazas; the fullness of culture that knows no border between the religious and the secular; Rome is alive, Ignacio, indeed it is full of life.

And this place is precisely the stamp of the Church for the world.

I am sitting in Saint Peter's Square writing to you. Just in front of me I can see the impressive facade of the Basilica, surrounded by the stone arms designed by Bernini. I have

received over and over again into my life this embracing of the Church.

However, there is a big leap – a ditch, according to the German philosopher Lessing – between our last letter and this embrace.

Ignacio, if Jesus was all that we have seen in the last letters, if He has done what He seems to have done, nevertheless, He did these two thousand years ago and so there is an unbridgeable abyss that separates us from Him. This broad ugly ditch that Lessing talks about condemns me to consider Jesus simply as a character, as a history... as deceased. Ultimately, Jesus is no longer here.

But if God became man, did He have a providential method in order to accompany the human being till the end of the world? Does the Incarnation of God get interrupted by His death on the Cross and His Resurrection?

For me and for many others, the Church has been a great opportunity to know Christ, and Him knowing me. That is why I don't experience the Church as a political party or association where I share with other members a strategy for an idea... No, for me the Church is a place, and here, Jesus of Nazareth, the One of two thousand years ago, has the same power and presence as He did for John and James, Peter, as for the other people who were together with Him. That is why the Church is the great possibility that my life has something to do with the One that claimed about Himself to be God.

Ignacio, your question also kept my mind busy. How can someone trust a human group that claims to be the living Presence of God? Does the divine dwell within the human?

This is impossible! All this was turning around in my mind and in my heart when I came across Augustine, the Christian mentioned in my previous letter. In this moment I realized that the form of affirmation has been the same for two thousand years: ‘come and you will see’, just as Jesus said it to John and James at three in the afternoon on the riverside of Jordan... *Come and you will see.* There is nothing else. The invitation of Jesus was not ‘come and see, what you will find will be perfect without any moral stain; rather he said: *come and you will see*, because perhaps you will find here the meaning of your life... And this is just what happened to me. The words of John Paul II many times surprise me: ‘The resurrected Christ makes himself literally contemporaneous to our life by means of the encounter with the Church, with this strange people that was born to communicate the divinity through the human’.

There is neither any other strategy behind this nor is it more complex. I know it is simple, yet it is the only perspective by which to understand the Church rightly. All the Church offers is a Presence, the presence of the living Christ.

If one wants to make an adequate judgment concerning the Church, before any other issue, one is compelled to verify whether what the Church claims about herself is true or not, i.e. about having the power to transmit Christ to me. For if it is not true, then I am not interested at all. The Church without Christ is nothing at all. And this question is not theoretical, but existential. If you do not risk involvement, it will be as difficult to understand something of the Church, as it is to understand something of Christ or something of oneself.

But did Christ really want the Church?

Throughout human history, whenever someone thought he had something important to say to others, something that should stay with them after his death, he normally choose one method: form a group of disciples who, after he passed away, could keep alive his teachings about the right form of life and philosophy. This is the case with Socrates, Plato, Buddha and others. And there are things of great importance for life that one does not learn by reading books or by attending conferences, but rather by participating in the communities that know them, study and try to live them.

It is clear that Jesus of Nazareth was one of those people who wanted his message and work to endure beyond his earthly life. And his method was exactly the same as that of other pioneers: form a group of disciples. He lived with them for several years; they listened to his teachings, understood and accepted their mission to live for Him. The method is not new; the novelty stems from the form of his presence in the group of the disciples, which after some years ended up calling herself the Church. The novelty consists in that Jesus remains present with his disciples in a distinct way, not merely as a memory or a remembrance of his teaching and the deeds of his life. Even if it seems incredible to us, the Teacher left to his group some signs that make Him present in important moments of life. The Sacraments administrated by the Church are neither symbols nor ideas, rather they are the action and the company of Jesus Himself who is alive. He also left a Word

that could be read and contemplated, which makes Him present as somebody who really communicates Himself. And He left His Spirit that makes all this possible in the heart of those who live in this community. This, as impossible as it may seem, is what the Church is.

Jesus did not have an expectation for the Church different from what you and I can now know. For the creation of his 'school', He did not have a secret strategy that was not respected. No. He counted on the fragility of his followers. And this weakness was not an impediment to his presence coming to you and to me. Take a look at these texts, Ignacio! I will enumerate them in case you want to reflect on them before we can meet at the university. The unavoidable question here is the following: which passages of the Gospels let us affirm that Christ really wanted to establish the Church?

(Mk 3): Many people followed Him; He had already chosen some of them so that they would follow Him but then He selected twelve by name 'to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons' (Mk 3:3-19). He starts to establish the structure and the head of the group He is gathering.

(Lk 10): He sends the seventy, 'and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go'. This training serves a purpose. It is something very serious: 'like lambs in the midst of wolves', 'Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road'. 'Say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you"'. (...) 'Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you

rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me'. (...) He gives them clear ideas and precise instructions, builds a very strong identity between Him and them; establishes a relation between what He does and what they do... He is not playing with them; they are getting prepared so that they can continue everything when He is gone.

(Mt 16): It comes to a very special moment when He observed that at least some followers saw it clearly, that He was 'the Messiah, the Son of the living God': 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven'. The solemnity of the moment makes very clear the wish of Christ to provide the Church with a new basis of unity and a new leadership, a Stone. And this Stone was not an irreproachable or perfect man. There was a moment when he betrayed Christ on the Cross because of his fear. And despite of this, the Resurrected Christ confirms once again his mission. 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these? Feed my lambs'. It looks like He had already counted on the sin of the members of His Church and this was not an impediment. If you keep on reading the proposed text, you will see that power to 'bind and to loose' on earth so that it will stay the same in heaven gets manifested. This is Rabbinic language that refers to the admission or the rejection of somebody among God's people as well as to apply the law of God in concrete situations.

It becomes clear how a community takes shape around Him and that this is His initiative: 'You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name' (Jn 15:16).

(Lk 22): Christ gives His body and blood for the new covenant (a new agreement between God and His people). He does so in the sacrament that today we call Eucharist. This total gift is an unprecedented claim. Moreover He entrusts it to just a few from this people because He gives them the power to 'do so': 'Do this in remembrance of me'. The Church that till that moment was in the process of configuration, had a very special centre from then on. The family had a table and a nutrition common to all.

(Jn 20): If His claim to being able to forgive the sins was scandalous, what did He purpose by sharing this power with the ones He chose by their names? "As the Father has sent me, so I send you". When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained". This is not given to some individuals in a private capacity, but only to a few members of the community ready to live it and ready to tell all the world about it. Sinners, those who are not pure, are the ones entrusted with the task of transmitting God's forgiveness, and it will be like this from generation to generation.

(Mt 28): And when He said goodbye after his resurrection, all became clear: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples

of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age'. In this text Jesus gives a solemn mission to a group of specific persons to make the group grow and to teach them a specific way of living: 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another' (Jn 13). Jesus is sending His Church to change the world through love. Ignacio, if you want, when we meet again we can discuss the judgment about whether He succeeded or not, but it is evident that this is the mission for which Jesus founded the Church.

I send you these texts as an invitation to face the answer as if contemplating a mosaic. Just as the whole Gospel reveals Christ to us, so also all of what He suggests allows for His continuity in the Church. I only showed you some tiles from that mosaic. At the end, by taking some steps back we can get the whole picture; thus we can better imagine the will of Christ to establish the Church.

The Church: yes, it is a family; no, it is not a religious party

The first Christians were not gathered in some kind of commune. Neither were they an amorphous assembly. The spine of their being together was a unity in which everyone

had a specific function. There was a mission for everyone, a new life for every member of the Church, a family... and Jesus occupied the centre. And this family stayed alive and that is why people like Theresa and John of Avila could appear, why a community of monks could be assassinated in Algeria, like brothers, sustained by the elder brother, Christ, and why Karol could give the torch of the Mission to Joseph... and why a host of young people gather together to welcome the representative of the Church, without knowing each other but calling themselves a Family. They can live this unity, keep being the community that follows Him, only if Jesus is among them and continues being really present, not only as a memory.

Only you can take the steps to know this Family, Ignacio. My experience is that I have found there some friends that have never left me since. Some friends that without having the same blood as me I call brothers. We know that our unity does not lie in the perfection of our lives, but in this Other that unites us, makes us look at each other with renewed eyes and allows for considering each other as a big gift in which He makes Himself present.

‘I am still in the Church for the same reasons that I am a Christian. In solitude, there is no way to believe. Faith is only possible in communion with other believers. By its own nature, faith is the power that unites. Either this faith is ecclesiastic or it is not such faith. Moreover, just as solitude renders belief impossible, and it is only possible in communion with others, one cannot have faith on one’s own initiative or invention’.¹¹

These words are not mine, I write them to you because sometimes what was said by someone else is exactly what we intended to say in a less appropriate way. What Cardinal Ratzinger says here is exactly my experience. I could not keep to myself all that happened to me when I discovered Christ, I needed not only to share but confront others with it, in order that it might live in them too.

Yes, but what about the sin, and the scandal of the Church?

But what about the sin of the Church? – you might ask me: How do we explain the existence of this reality, which is so woven into the history of the Church?

I can assure you that you are not the only one puzzled by the fact that Jesus wanted to continue His earthly existence through a bunch of cowards [the Apostles] who did not stand up for Him [Peter] or even betrayed Him [Judas]. And the method that God has chosen to make Himself known to His creatures is carried within the human being, but it does not exclusively reside in those aspects of our nature that we like, but rather in the human being as a whole, including those parts of us that we would get rid of if we could. Jesus, a man like any of us, is the conveyor of God the Father. ‘Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary? (...) And they took offence at him’ (Mk 6, 3). Jesus was reproached. How is it possible that God in Christ could be someone so normal? Today, Christians

are feeling the same scandal that Jesus' human condition caused to those who knew Him.

You might have already heard this metaphor in some of my classes. Surely, I have not mentioned it yet concerning the Church, but rather only in relation to other aspects of life. The original idea is this:

‘We can think of the Catholic Church by comparing it with the moon: because of the relationship moon-woman (mother), and because of the fact that the moon does not have its own light but rather receives it from the sun, without which it would be completely dark. The moon is shining but the light isn't its own; it is someone else's. The moon probe and the astronauts discovered that the moon is only a desert steppe full of rocks, just hills and sand; they saw a different reality from that of the antiquity: no light. And indeed the moon is, in itself and by itself, only a desert, sand and stones. Nevertheless, it is also light and it remains so, even in the time of space flights.

Is not that a proper image for the Church? Those who explore and probe into the Church, as on the moon, can only discover the desert, the sand and the stones: weaknesses of man and his history through the dust, the deserts and the hills. The decisive fact is that the Church, even being only sand and stones, is light as well in virtue of Someone else, the Lord.

I am in the Church because I believe that today, like yesterday, independently of us, behind “our Church”, “His Church” is alive and I can only be close to Him by

remaining in the Church. I am in the Church because, in spite of everything, deep down I believe it is not ours but His'.¹²

News do not depend on the dignity of the messenger, not even on his credibility but on the content of the information that it has to convey. Ignacio, do you remember Pheidippides, the Athenian soldier? He could be a liar, but his announcement of victory meant relief for those who awaited in anxiety, considering the possibility of a certain death at the hands of the enemy. Nobody in that vital moment analyzed the merits of the messenger soldier, only whether what he had to say was true.

Sin is something that Jesus presumed of all men so you and I could feel included in salvation through the Church. How would we feel that we belonged to the one Family, if it became an exclusive club only for an elite that faithfully observed the laws with no room for anything else but the irreproachable? What family could close the door in front of the son that did not behave like a son? Sometimes we aim to be faithful adherents to a law that surpasses us and makes us grow apart from the people that, just like us, desire a meaningful life but that – just like us – do not encounter their rescue in moral perfection, but rather in a love that, out of gratitude, wants to be morally perfect.

As you see, Ignacio, once again the fundamental question is the same: either the Church, with or without sin, can give me Christ or it does not matter for me what she has to say because it would be just another invention about the quest for a paradise that echoes in us. The fraud does not consist

in a Church that is not perfect (and I know well that it is not perfect for I am part of it), the fraud would be an immaculate Church without Christ.

The sacraments: signs that cross the 'broad ugly ditch'

If we believe that the claim of Christ and His Church is true and can really transform us from within, if we can really overcome 'the broad ugly ditch' that separates us from Jesus, then we must ask immediately: how is the transformation possible? How can the Church give us divine life as promised by Jesus? The mere fact that we are worried about these questions bewilders us for we are normal and ordinary people and it seems to us that we cannot even wish for something that great, right? And it is here that the sacramental life of the Church makes sense. The value of every sacrament for the different moments each person's life demonstrates the power to transform an individual by putting him in contact with Christ, according to his reality, from his most profound desire.

That is how we count on baptism. By deciding to share with us the burden of life, i.e. experiencing the limits that make us incapable to provide ourselves with the happiness we yearn for, Jesus lined up with the sinners and was immersed in the waters of the river Jordan in order to be baptized by John the Baptist. We Christians take up again this baptism with a new meaning. Immersing the person that is to be baptized in the baptismal font or wetting his head means uniting him with Christ in the act of entering the sepulcher in solidarity

with our death, an to be resurrected with Him and, thus, to personally share in His victory over the death.

This is the glory of baptism: by it, in an indelible way, our existence becomes unified with that of Christ and of all Christians; we become one body, the body of Christ, the Church, the sacrificed body. Becoming part of the body of Christ we learn to live as a member according to the logic of the Gospel, that the grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, and will bear the fruit of love.

And in this way, through the sacraments our life participates in the life of Christ. They refer to the incandescent heart of God, to the Passover of Christ that reaches the final end of giving Himself and in this way He defeats death and makes life worth living. Through the sacraments and in its different stages (birth and death, health and sickness, spousal love, service to the community, sin and forgiveness...) life gets introduced to the Easter-event of Jesus, from whom it receives its power and meaning. It is Christ Himself, in virtue of the sacraments, who enters our life and acts in it with the power of His love.

Again, the apparent claim of Christ and His Church may seem incredible to you, but I suggest that you reflect once again on this ineffable mystery within the context of your life. It took me long time to do so, but only when I approached the Church in this way could I be sure of its veracity.

While writing this letter to you, I am looking in front of me at what is considered the burial place of Peter according to the tradition. Peter, the disciple who denied knowing Christ out of fear, was crucified like his teacher a few years later because of his testimony of Christ's resurrection. What is it

that he saw to let himself be crucified for Him with his head down? He was killed in the outskirts of Rome and his body was left there in order to prevent his followers' veneration. Once again the Romans tried to eradicate something they considered a nuisance. Over his tomb, in various basilicas, thousands of pilgrims and dozens of artists went on to write history; the history of the Church, the history of man.

Twenty centuries have passed and some of us feel at home in this square.

This is the secret that made it possible for me to experience that every place in the world can be home.

Dear Ignacio, I hope that our next conversation will be over a glass of wine. I will arrive in a few weeks more. Meanwhile let me restate again the desire that motivated me to write you these letters: I want you to find the answer to your life. If you discover that Jesus has something to do with it, let Him in, and fear nothing.

I am not telling you this as a readymade answer, but as the greatest truth that I found in my life. For faith consists, not in believing in God, but in discovering that God believes and acts in you every single day of your life.

Thanks for having made this journey with me!

By the way, all the best (today is your saint's day)!

Best regards,

Your new professor

From: Your old professor <OldProfessor@university.es>
Subject: **Bibliographical references**
Date: August 20th, 2011 14:12:43 GMT+02:00
To: Ignacio

Ignacio, here I send you these titles just in case you want to take a look at them before we meet again:

Jesus of Nazareth. From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration

Joseph Ratzinger-Pope Benedict XVI
Doubleday, 2007

Jesus of Nazareth. Holy Week, From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection

Joseph Ratzinger-Pope Benedict XVI
Ignatius Press, 2011

A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus (4 vols)

John P. Maier
Doubleday

NOTAS

1. W. SHAKESPEARE, *Macbeth*, 5, 5.
2. J. HIERRO, *Alegría*, Gráficas Uguina (Col. «Adonais», XXXIX), Madrid, 1947.
3. I. MONTANELLI (February 1996); in U. ECO, C.M. MARTINI, *¿En qué creen los que no creen?*, Temas de Hoy, Madrid, 1997, pp. 128-130. Quote from the Spanish edition as translated by M. SZALAY & A. RICHES.
4. M. ZAMBRANO, *Filosofía y educación*, Editorial Ágora, Málaga, 2007, p. 116-118.
5. Cf. BENEDICTO XVI, *Deus caritas es*, 'Introducción', Editorial San Pablo, 2001, p. 7. Quote from the Spanish edition as translated by M. SZALAY & A. RICHES. For an English edition, cf. 'Introduction', in *God is Love: Deus Caritas Est*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006.
6. A. CAMUS, *El primer hombre*, Tusquets Editores, Barcelona, 2003. Quote from the Spanish edition as translated by M. SZALAY & A. RICHES. For an English edition, cf. *The First Man*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1996.
7. All the biblical passages quoted are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.
8. J. M. GARCÍA, *Orígenes históricos del cristianismo*, Encuentro Ediciones, Madrid, 2007, p. 54.
9. V. FRANKL, *El hombre en busca del sentido último*, Paidós, Barcelona, 1999, p. 204. Quote from the Spanish edition as translated by M. SZALAY & A. RICHES. For an English edition, cf. *Man's Search for Meaning*, Beacon Press, Boston, 2006.

10. D. FLUSSER, *Jesús en sus palabras y en su tiempo*, Ediciones Cristiandad, Madrid, 1975, p. 138. Quote from the Spanish edition as translated by M. SZALAY & A. RICHES.
11. Cf. '¿Por qué permanezco en la Iglesia?' (conference-testimony. Germany, 1971), in H.U. VON BALTHASAR and J. RATZINGER, *¿Por qué soy todavía cristiano? ¿Por qué permanezco en la Iglesia?*, Ediciones Sígueme, Salamanca, 2005, pp. 81-113. Quote from the Spanish edition as translated by M. SZALAY & A. RICHES. For an English edition, cf. 'Why I Am Still in Church', in *Two Say Why*, Search Press, Boston, 1971.
12. *Ibíd.*

The old professor is a group of teachers from various Spanish universities that shared the initiative to write these letters. The restless heart personifies the thousands of students they met in the lecturing halls along their years of teaching experience.

Delegación de la Pastoral Universitaria de la Archidiócesis de Madrid is happy to accompany the 'old professor' on his journey and offers the letters to every 'Ignacio' who wants to read them as an open story that only gets finished in the restless heart that receives it.

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