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# THE PACT OF THE CATACOMBS

THE MISSION OF THE POOR IN THE CHURCH

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verbo divino

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José Antunes da Silva (eds.)

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The mission of the  
poor in the Church

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# Presentation

## 1. Context

In 2015 the Catholic Church is celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Second Vatican Council, a council that was a landmark in the two thousand years of the Church's history. At the end of the Council, inspired by what was being done and said in the Council hall, some forty bishops from various countries of the world met in the Catacombs of Domitilla to sign what is today known as *The Pact of the Catacombs*, a text and programme that sets out *the mission of the poor in the Church*.

With this Pact the bishops committed themselves to walk with the poor and be not only a Church for the poor, but also of the poor, since it is the poor who embody and carry out the Gospel's highest mission. To achieve this end the bishops decided to adopt a simple style of life, characteristic of the poor, renouncing not only the symbols of power, but all outward power, as a way of recovering, with the help of the Triune God and the Spirit of Christ, the original missionary impulse of the Church for the contemporary world (it was 1965), marked by the harsh economic struggle and general oppression of the poor.

The spirit of the Pact of the Catacombs has guided some of the best Christian initiatives of the last fifty years, not only in Latin America, where it had particular impact, but throughout the Catholic Church, so that its witness (its inspiration and its text) have become one of the most influential and important signs of twentieth-century Catholicism. This Pact remains as important today as when it was signed, and we can and must receive and promote it with more force than at the time of the Council, even though not all of us Christians (individuals and communities), have welcomed it with the same enthusiasm.

It is therefore good to use this date (its fiftieth anniversary) to celebrate it. This is what Pope Francis feels: through his words and his example of life he has once more placed the option for the poor at the centre of the

Church's life and teaching, overriding whatever vacillations may have existed on the subject. In the same spirit we may assert that, following the spirit of Vatican II and the message of Pope Francis, the Pact of the Catacombs of Domitilla can and must be an inspiration and a guide for the whole Church.

This feeling has in a special way inspired the Divine Word Missionaries, who not only are the custodians of the Catacombs of Domitilla, where this Pact was signed, but also wish to promote a Christian mission carried out from the position of the poor and with them. In this sense, without abandoning the "mission to the nations", i.e. to peoples who are not yet Christians, we have to take up in a special, privileged way, the "mission to the poor" with Jesus himself, who came to evangelise the poor (cf. Lk 4:18-19; Mt 11:3), as this Pact emphasised.

To act on this decision, on the fiftieth anniversary of this document and of the end of Vatican II, we have brought together in this book not only the text of the Pact and the names of those who signed it, but also some important studies that help to explain it, place it in its past history, and also suggest its relevance for today and for the future. We want this Pact to continue to provide a message of encouragement for the whole Church, not only for the bishops, who were and are primarily responsible for the "mission to the poor", but also for all Christians committed to the work of the Gospel; we are thinking particularly of women and men religious so that there can be an updating of the structures of consecrated life and its way of serving the poor from its union with Christ, as has been emphasised in this year, 2015, devoted to it.

This book seeks to make known and has adopted the gift and the task of the Pact of the Catacombs, its content and its implications for the life of the Church. That is why we wanted to study it from various points of view – its biblical and ecclesiological foundations, the option for the poor, the Church's commitment and evangelisation in terms of today's world, fifty years after Vatican II – to contextualise and give force to its message. We have done this with three principal aims:

1. To understand and adopt more firmly the spirit of Vatican II and the Church commitments made by the bishops in the Pact of the Catacombs;

2. To renew the commitment made by the whole Church to transform human life and build a world based on solidarity and justice, starting from the Gospel of the poor;

3. To endorse with the “fathers” of the 1965 Pact the invitation that Pope Francis keeps giving us in 2015 to be a Church of the poor that evangelises and serves human beings out of its own poverty.

The Pact of the Catacombs was intended as the specific text and commitment of a limited number of bishops (forty), who signed it in their own names, in the context of the Council, but not in the rich Vatican basilica, but in the poor catacomb of Domitilla, in a place that keeps alive the tradition of the Church of the persecuted and excluded in ancient Rome. But these bishops were representative of many other Council fathers, perhaps around 700, most notably Cardinal Giacomo Lercaro of Bologna, remembered for his commitment to the service of the poor in the Church. In this context it is also appropriate to remember the groups of “poor Christians”, many linked to the memory of Charles de Foucauld and the Little Brothers of Jesus, who did so much in the context of the Council to highlight the memory of the Christ of the poor. This memory allows us to interpret the Pact in a perspective that is not just that of bishops, but also of history and theology, open to all the areas of Christian life and mission.

## **2. The text**

### **Pact of the Catacombs**

(Catacombs of Domitilla, 16 November 1965)

*On 16 November 1965, a few days before the end of the Council, around forty Council fathers celebrated the Eucharist in the Catacombs of Domitilla. They prayed “to be faithful to the spirit of Jesus” and at the end of the celebration they signed what they called The Pact of the Catacombs. The “Pact” is an invitation to their “brothers in the episcopate” to live a “life of poverty” and to be a Church “of service and poverty”, as John XXIII had wanted. The signatories - who included many Latin Americans, notably Brazilians,*

*who were later joined by others - committed themselves to live in poverty, to reject all symbols or privileges of power, and to place the poor at the centre of their pastoral ministry.*

We, bishops, gathered at the Second Vatican Council, conscious of the inadequacies of our life of poverty in terms of the Gospel, motivated by each other in an initiative in which each of us has avoided standing out or taking leadership, united with all our brothers in the episcopate, relying above all on the grace and strength of our Lord Jesus Christ, on the prayers of the faithful and priests of our respective dioceses, placing ourselves in thought and prayer before the Trinity, before the Church of Christ and before the priests and faithful of our dioceses, with humility and awareness of our weakness, but also with all the determination and all the strength that God wills to give us as his grace, make the following commitments:

1. We shall seek to live in the ordinary way of the people around us as regards accommodation, food, transport and everything that follows from this. Cf. Mt 5:3; 6:33f; 8:20.

2. We renounce forever the appearance and the reality of wealth, especially in dress (rich vestments, striking colours) and in symbols made of precious metals (these signs must certainly be evangelical). Cf. Mk 6:9; Mt 10:9f; Acts 3:6 (“No gold or silver”).

3. We shall not possess property or buildings, nor shall we have banks accounts, etc., in our own names, and if it is necessary to possess anything, we shall place it all in the name of the diocese or of social or charitable institutions. Cf. Mt 6:19-21; Lk 12:33f.

4. As far as possible, we shall entrust the financial and material management of our dioceses to a committee of laypeople who are competent and conscious of their apostolic role, in order to be less administrators and more pastors and apostles. Cf. Mt 10:8; Acts 6:1-7.

5. We reject being addressed either verbally or in writing by names and titles that express greatness and power (‘Eminence’, ‘Excellency’, ‘My Lord’...). We prefer to be called by the Gospel title of ‘Father’. Cf. Mt 20:25-28; 23:6-11; Jn 13:12-15.

6. In our behaviour and our social relations we shall avoid anything that might appear to grant privileges or priority or to show preference for the

rich or powerful (for example in giving or attending banquets or having distinctions in religious services). Cf. Lk 13:12-14; 1 Cor 9:14-19.

7. Similarly we shall avoid encouraging or flattering the vanity of anyone, in repaying or asking for help, or for any other reason. We shall invite our faithful to consider their donations as a normal part of worship, the apostolate and social action. Cf. Mt 6:2-4; Lk 15:9-13; 2 Cor 12:4.

8. We shall give all that is required of our time, thought, heart, resources, etc. to the apostolic and pastoral service of people and groups that are workers and economically weak and underdeveloped, without letting this prejudice other people and groups in the diocese. We shall support the laity, religious, deacons and priests whom the Lord calls to evangelise the poor and the workers by sharing their lives and work. Cf. Lk 4:18f; Mk 6:4; Mt 11:4f; Acts 18:3f; 20:33-35; 1 Cor 4:12; 9:1-27.

9. Conscious of the demands of justice and charity, and of the relationship between the two, we shall seek to transform charitable institutions into social programmes based on charity and justice directed to all, as a humble service to the relevant public bodies. Cf. Mt 25:31-46; Lk 13:12-14; 33f.

10. We shall do everything possible to ensure that the leaders of our governments and public services adopt and put into practice the laws, structures and social institutions that are necessary for justice, equality and the harmonious and complete development of the whole human being and of all human beings and thereby for the coming of a new social order worthy of human children and children of God. Cf. Acts 2:44f; 4:32-35; 5:4; 2 Cor 8-9; 1 Tim 5:16.

11. Since the collegiality of bishops finds its fullest Gospel realisation in common service to the majorities in physical, cultural and moral poverty – two-thirds of humanity – we commit ourselves:

- \* to share, according to our possibilities, in the urgent programmes of the bishops of the poor nations;

- \* to ask jointly, in international bodies, always giving witness to the Gospel, as Pope Paul VI did at the United Nations, for the adoption of economic and cultural structures that do not produce poor nations in an

increasingly rich world, but enable the poor majorities to escape from their poverty.

12. We commit ourselves to share our lives in pastoral charity with our sisters and brothers in Christ, priests, religious and laity, so that our ministry becomes a true service. Therefore

- \* we shall make every effort to make a “revision of life” with them;
- \* we shall look for collaborators so that we may be more like animators in the spirit of the Gospel than bosses on a worldly model;
- \* we shall seek to make ourselves present and welcoming as far as is humanly possible;
- \* we shall be open to all, whatever their religion. Cf. Mk 8:34f; Acts 6:1-7; 1 Tim 3:8-10.

13. When we return to our dioceses we shall inform the people of our dioceses of these resolutions, asking them to help us with their understanding, their collaboration and their prayers.

May God help us to be faithful.

### **3. Signatories<sup>1</sup>**

There is no official list of the 39 bishops present at the celebration of mass in the Catacombs of Domitilla on 16 November 1965 when the Pact of the Catacombs was signed. They wanted to have a discreet celebration far from the press, with a few bishops (originally it was presumed that there would be only about 20) to prevent their act of simplicity and commitment being interpreted as a ‘lesson’ to the other bishops. As a result the first report of the celebration appeared in a note by Henri Fesquet in the French newspaper *Le Monde* over three weeks later, as the Council ended on 8 December 1965, under the title “Un groupe d’évêques anonymes s’engage à donner le témoignage extérieur d’une vie de stricte pauvreté” (“An anonymous group of bishops commit to giving outward witness of a life of strict poverty”); cf. Henri Fesquet, *Journal du Concile*, Forcalquier, Paris

1966, pp. 1110-13). The report did not mention names, but in the papers of Mgr Charles Marie Himmer, bishop of Tournai, Belgium, who presided at the celebration in the morning and gave the homily, a list of the participants was found.

### **Brazil**

Dom Antônio Fragoso (Crateús-Ceará)

Dom Francisco Mesquita Filho Austregésilo (Afogados da Ingazeira, Pernambuco)

Dom João Batista da Mota e Albuquerque, archbishop of Vitória, Espírito Santo

P. Luiz Gonzaga Fernandes, who was to be consecrated auxiliary bishop of Vitória

Dom Jorge Marcos de Oliveira (Santo André-São Paulo)

Dom Hélder Câmara, archbishop of Recife

Dom Henrique Golland Trindade, OFM, archbishop of Botucatu, São Paulo

Dom José Maria Pires, archbishop of Paraíba, Paraíba.

### **Colombia**

Mgr Tulio Botero Salazar, archbishop of Medellín

Mgr Antonio Medina Medina, auxiliary bishop of Medellín

Mgr Aníbal Muñoz Duque, bishop of Nueva Pamplona

Mgr Raúl Zambrano, bishop of Facatativá

Mgr Angelo Cuniberti, Vicar Apostolic of Florencia

### **Argentina**

Mgr Alberto Devoto, of the diocese of Goya

Mgr Vicente Faustino Zazpe, of the diocese of Rafaela

Mgr Juan José Iriarte of Reconquista,

Mgr Enrique Angelelli, auxiliary bishop of Córdoba

### **Other Latin American countries**

Mgr Alfredo Viola, bishop of Salto (Uruguay)

Mgr Marcelo Mendiharat, auxiliary bishop of Salto (Uruguay)

Mgr Manuel Larraín, bishop of Talca (Chile)

Mgr Gregorio McGrath Marcos, bishop of Santiago de Veraguas,  
Panama

Mgr Leonidas Proaño, bishop of Riobamba, Ecuador

### **France**

Mons Guy Marie Riobé, bishop of Orleans

Mons Gérard Huyghe, bishop of Arras

Mgr Adrien Gand, auxiliary bishop of Lille

### **Other European countries**

Mgr Charles Marie Himmer, bishop of Tournai, Belgium

Mgr Rafael González Moralejo, auxiliary bishop of Valencia, Spain

Mgr Julius Angerhausen, auxiliary bishop of Essen, Germany

Mgr Luigi Bettazzi, auxiliary bishop of Bologna

### **Africa**

Mgr Bernard Yago, archbishop of Abidjan, Ivory Coast

Mgr José Blomjous, bishop of Mwanza, Tanzania

Mgr Georges Mercier, bishop of Laghouat in the Sahara, Africa

### **Asia and North America**

Mgr Hakim, Melchite bishop of Nazareth

Mgr Haddad, Melchite bishop, auxiliary bishop of Beirut, Lebanon

Mgr Gérard Marie Coderre, bishop of Saint Jean de Québec, Canada

Mgr Charles Joseph van Melckebeke, Belgian-born, bishop of  
Ningxia, China

*Translated by Francis McDonagh*

<sup>1</sup> Source: Rev. José Óscar BEOZZO, 29.06.2009: <http://nucleodememoria.vrac.puc-rio.br/site/dhc/textos/beozzocatacumbas.pdf>.

# Introduction

HEINZ KULÜKE

Some years ago I got an invitation to give a talk to a group of missionary sisters in Cebu, in the Philippines, about our social and pastoral work. This invitation I kindly declined. Instead I invited the sisters to come and visit our project areas, to meet and learn from the poor we were journeying with at that time and thus to simply see for themselves. We began with a visit to the garbage dumping sites and then in later months met with people in the streets and red light districts.

Initially the extremely poor living and working conditions, the dirt and the smell, the numerous women and children suffering that touched the sisters' hearts. But right from the beginning the sisters also experienced the honest friendliness, the trust, sympathy, simplicity, hospitality, care, warm welcome and basic joy of the poor so generously shared with their visitors.

The first encounter with the people in the garbage pit left a lasting impression on the sisters, something a talk never could have achieved. The sisters started coming back every weekend. More and more sisters came. Also the older sisters joined "the new outreach" as they called their Saturday afternoon activity. They had heard from the younger sisters and wanted to see for themselves. Not much time passed and the sisters brought friends along. The sisters' friends too wanted to see for themselves. The sisters discovered a place where they could not only give and share but also a place where they could learn. Till today the sisters are with those at the margins.

The "unplanned effects" of that episode are numerous: The sisters' number of friends has increased ... The poor have become an essential part of the sisters' daily conversations, their concerns, their planning, their formation programs, their faith, their liturgy and their prayers. Furthermore, the poor have brought us – Divine Word Missionaries, Missionaries Servant Sisters of the Holy Spirit, and lay mission partners – together anew in a life

giving and working relationship. Now we have something to talk about when we meet, not merely about ourselves. We identify problems together, look for solutions together, plan, implement and evaluate our projects together. The good example of the sisters has inspired and still inspires many of us and our lay mission partners. The encounter with those at the margins has become a genuine blessing. Where God has found his home religious also can find a new home and new meaning.

I recall this experience as we are celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Pact of the Catacombs, a commitment signed by a group of bishops to be closer to the poor. Several initiatives have been organized to celebrate the Pact of the Catacombs and among them the publication of this book. This occurs in the context of two important events in the Church: the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the closing of Council Vatican II, and the celebrating of the Year of Consecrated Life.

The Vatican II was a milestone in the recent history of the Catholic Church. The Council offered orientation and guidelines to renew the Church; to make it closer to the lives of the people and attentive to the challenges of the world; it proposed a renovation of Christian life inspired by the Gospel. Moved by what was going on and what was said during the Council, already towards its end 40 bishops from all over the world signed a pact in the Catacombs of Domitilla known as the Pact of the Catacombs. With this gesture, the bishops promised to journey with the poor and to be a poor Church that serves the poor by living a simple life style and withdrawing symbols of power.

In convoking the Year of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis wanted to propose again to the Church as a whole the beauty and value of this special form of discipleship of Christ. He renewed the call to wake up the world and to illuminate it with our prophetic and countercultural witness. In the letter written for this occasion, Pope Francis writes: “I am counting on you ‘to wake up the world’, since the distinctive sign of consecrated life is prophecy. [...] Prophets know God and they know the men and women who are their brothers and sisters. They are able to discern and denounce the evil of sin and injustice. Because they are free, they are beholden to no one but God, and they have no interest other than God. Prophets tend to be on the side of the poor and the powerless, for they know that God himself is on

their side”<sup>1</sup>. Celebrating the Pact of the Catacombs is a way to renew the commitment of religious women and men to the prophetic dimension of their mission and vocation. In line with the spirit of Vatican II this can be very inspiring for the whole Church today.

The Pact of the Catacombs brings us in contact with the essentials of our faith, the simplicity of the Gospel. It is true that it remained unknown to the wider Church for many years, as only a small minority of Christians kept its memory alive. Fortunately, recently it has been made known. The Pact is like a hidden gem that sees the light of day. But, unlike the treasures of archeological research, the nature of the Pact is not to be preserved in a museum to be admired by lovers of ancient artifacts. As I read the Pact of the Catacombs some questions come to my mind: What are we going to do with this rediscovered treasure? Bury it again or, on the contrary, make it profitable? (cf. Lk 19,11-26). How relevant can the Pact be for the future, a pact that has been in existence for some 50 years already, a pact that probably did not have the impact that it wanted and envisioned to have? Have the times changed for a bigger impact of the pact?

Besides making the Pact known to the wider public, the publication of this book is a contribution to revive the spirit of Vatican II, renewing the commitment of the whole Church for the transformation of the world, reinforcing the invitation of Pope Francis for a poor Church that serves the poor, and contextualizing the Pact’s message for the Church of today. As we celebrate the 50 years of the Pact, we need to make it flourish into new projects, new avenues of life and brotherhood, in lives committed to serving the poor, in policies that bring about justice and peace. I think that we could also develop what was not explicitly stated in the Pact when it was signed, due to its historical context, but what can easily be foreseen, for example, the role of women in the Church and in society, the harmony with creation, environmental protection, prophecy as an alternative attitude, critique of consumerism, the fight against corruption etc.

The Catacombs of Domitilla belong to the Holy See but, in 2009, they were entrusted to the care of the Society of the Divine Word. The fact that we are in charge of running these particular catacombs has become for us an opportunity to strengthen our commitment as missionaries at the service of the Kingdom of God. The vision and the ideas highlighted in the Pact are

very much in line with the vision and the mission of our Society. Following our last General Chapter (2012) we adopted the motto: *missio inter gentes – putting the last first*. Thousands of pilgrims and tourists visit this sacred place every year. Being the caretakers of the Catacombs of Domitilla, offers an opportunity to make known the Pact and to commit ourselves anew to the missionary vision of our Society.

Pope Francis reminds us in *Evangelii Gaudium* that both Christian preaching and life “are meant to have an impact on society” (EG 180). Furthermore, every community “is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society. This demands that we be docile and attentive to the cry of the poor and to come to their aid” (EG 187). Pope Francis also writes that he wants “a Church which is poor and for the poor” (EG 198). The bishops who 50 years ago signed the Pact of the Catacombs had the same dream and thought for it. Let us be inspired by their commitment and their prophetic words, and let us try to give up our lives at the service of those who are more vulnerable and marginalized.