

# Catholic reformers' letter to Pope Francis: tackle injustice within the Church

*Reform-minded Catholics urge Pope to listen to the the laity on governance and women*

26 September 2013.

*This week in Rome Pope Francis is meeting with the group of eight cardinals he named shortly after his election to discuss how best to implement reform within the Church. Last week a coalition of reform-minded Catholics sent an open letter to the Pope and the eight, outlining the issues they feel he should focus on. The letter is below:*

His Holiness, Pope Francis

Cardinal Giuseppe Bertello,  
President of the Vatican City state administration  
Cardinal Francisco Javier Errazuriz Ossa,  
Retired archbishop of Santiago, Chile  
Cardinal Oswald Gracias,  
Archbishop of Mumbai, India  
Cardinal Reinhard Marx,  
Archbishop of Munich and Freising, Germany  
Cardinal Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya,  
Achbishop of Kinshasa, Congo  
Cardinal Sean Patrick O'Malley,  
Achbishop of Boston  
Cardinal George Pell,  
Achbishop of Sydney, Australia  
Cardinal Oscar Andrés Rodríguez Maradiaga,  
Archbishop of Tegucigalpa, Honduras

Dear Pope Francis and Brother Cardinals,

It is out of a deep concern for the Catholic Church, in the face of its many crises, that we, representing millions of Catholics from around the world, have collaborated in writing this letter. We are filled with hope that church governance will be discussed at your October meeting and we respectfully request that you give primary consideration to acknowledging the rights and responsibilities of the baptised to have a voice of influence in the decision-making of our Church.

Like you, we have experienced the catastrophic loss of trust in our Church, arising from the global revelations of Catholic clergy sexual abuse and hierarchical cover up. Abuses of power at the Vatican bank, as well as damaging disrespect and marginalisation experienced by the laity, have caused many of our sisters and brothers to abandon Catholicism altogether. Our church seems unable to read the signs of the times and so handing on the faith to future generations has become ever more challenging.

In our understanding, what lies at the root of many of these problems is the destructive effects of clericalism. We support your desire, Pope Francis, to rid our Church of clericalism in order that we become a community of equals called, through our baptism, to live and proclaim the Gospel of Jesus. All Catholics have the right and responsibility, innately deriving from our baptism, to have an effective and deliberative voice in the decision-making of our Church. The full participation of the faith community is in accordance with the Gospel, the tradition of the early Church, and the vision of Vatican II.

To this end we have outlined five areas that reflect the hopes and needs of the *sensus fidelium*.

### **1. A Church that embodies the radical justice of Jesus in the world**

We are inspired, Pope Francis, by your compassion for the poor and desire for social justice as well as your personal commitment to live more simply. We want to work, as sisters and brothers, to build the reign of God on earth - so that all people may live free from oppression, war, unjust economic systems, violence, hunger, poverty, and the degradation of God's creation. But our commitment to justice is compromised and often viewed as hypocritical because injustice exists within the Church itself. We hope for a time when all Catholics come to experience a joyfully renewed church that truly places justice and respect for the dignity and equality of every person at the heart of its lived mission.

### **2. A Church that welcomes open dialogue among its members**

When speaking in Brazil, Pope Francis, you advised that 'dialogue, dialogue, dialogue' is a cornerstone of all human progress, and we agree. The freedom of expression (including faithful dissent when required), freedom of reasoned inquiry, and the primacy of an informed conscience are vital to the health of our Church. We believe that prophetic women and men are continually calling us to engage the urgent theological, pastoral, social, and environmental questions of our time in new and inspiring ways.

In this light, we recommend reinstating theologians, clergy and religious who, since Vatican II, have been censored and/or sanctioned for following their conscience. Secondly, as has been expressed by so many Catholics around the world, we believe that the Apostolic Visitation of US Women Religious and the investigation of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious were unwarranted and unjust. Open dialogue cannot exist where fear of punitive action exists.

### **3. A Church that recognises the fundamental equality of its members**

Catholic teaching tells us that all persons have been created with equal dignity in the image of God. Therefore church structures must reflect this reality. Since all governance in the Church now rests exclusively with ordained male celibate priests, this excludes the vast majority of baptised Catholics. Therefore we recommend a canonical study of the feasibility of linking church governance to baptism rather than to ordination. With regard to ordained ministry, we recommend that identifying the call be based on individual and communal discernment of the candidate's gifts, spirituality, pastoral sense, and theological formation, rather than gender, sexual orientation, or state in life. We reject the sexist exclusion of women from full participation at all levels of the Church. Equally, it is unacceptable to deny our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters' access to full participation in every aspect of Church life and ministry. And it is unjust to ordain married male ministers from other denominations, while refusing to accept lifelong Catholic priests who have left the active ministry to marry. Further, divorced and remarried Catholics should not be withheld from full communion; their personal conscience in this matter should be respected.

### **4. A Church with greater participation of the baptised in governance:**

Addressing the needs of our Church requires implementing collegial systems and structures based on:

- i) participation of the faithful in the selection and tenure of bishops
- ii) reinstatement of the principle of subsidiarity in parish councils, diocesan pastoral councils, and national conferences of bishops
- iii) inclusion of qualified lay men and women serving in leadership positions in the Curia

Implementation of collegial structures will promote a culture of authentically accountable leadership that more fully orients the Church toward the common good.

## **5. A Church that effectively confronts and prevents sexual abuse**

The scandal of clergy sexual abuse can only be overcome when the bishops who facilitate or ignore the abuse are removed from office and brought to justice by church and civil authorities with universal, binding protocols established and implemented. The Catholic Church must earnestly examine the complex of systemic causes that have led to this scandal of global proportions and do everything in its power to prevent it in the future.

In closing, we ask you once again to recognise the rights and responsibilities of the baptised to participate in the deliberative decision-making of our Church. We offer to send a delegation to the Vatican to discuss our proposal further. We look forward to your reply as, together, we continue this important dialogue for the good of our church. We pray the wisdom of the Holy Spirit be upon you and your deliberations.

Your sisters and brothers in Christ,

[Copied to]

Monsignor Marcello Semeraro, Bishop of Albano, panel secretary  
Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, President, Pontifical Council for Culture  
Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, U.S. Apostolic Nuncio  
Archbishop Pietro Parolin, Secretary of State

*The Tablet* 26-Sep-13:

Supporters of the letter include several UK groups such as **Catholics for a Changing Church, Catholic Women's Ordination, We Are Church UK** and **QUEST**.

It is supported by the worldwide **We Are Church** movement and by several large US organisations such as **Call to Action, American Catholic Council**, and **CORPUS**.

The organisers said they represent several million Catholics in nearly 40 countries and have received the support of three Australian bishops: Geoffrey Robinson, Bill Morris and Pat Power.