



Letter from Taizé

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When we decided, with those responsible for young adult ministry in Chile, that our second international meeting in Latin America would be held in Santiago from December 8-12, 2010, we had no idea that 2010 would be a year in which, for the people of Chile, the trials would be commensurate with the joys. Preparing the young adult meeting throughout this year allowed several of our brothers to share in both of these.

At the same time as Chileans celebrated, with other Latin American countries, the bicentennial of the birth of the Republic, the violence of land and sea inflicted great suffering on them.

The earthquake in February affected the poor most of all. But the outpouring of generosity that arose from the depths of the nation's soul showed to what extent Chileans are one family, united in adversity. Many young Chileans went to help those who had lost home and work. They gave their time and energy to build *mediasaguas*, small wooden huts that serve as temporary housing.

In the same year, Chile's indigenous peoples, notably some groups of the Mapuche people, expressed their suffering and their demands by undertaking a long hunger strike.

A little later, the images of 33 miners being brought back to the surface after the mine accident gave joy to an entire nation.

In early December, the international meeting enabled 8000 young people, not only from Chile but from throughout the continent, to share joys, sorrows and challenges and so to work together to bring about a more human world.

We were happy to welcome 25 young Haitians to this meeting. Their presence reminded us of the enormous distress which the earthquake of January 2010 caused in their country. The wounds are far from healed. A short visit to Haiti, between the Santiago meeting and the European meeting in Rotterdam, offered Brother Alois a way of expressing the solidarity of young people from all continents as well as their admiration: faith keeps that people on their feet in the midst of adversity.

We will continue to pray with them during the coming year:

God our hope, we entrust to you the people of Haiti. Dismayed by the incomprehensible suffering of the innocent, we ask you to inspire the hearts of those who bring the necessary aid. We know the deep faith of the Haitian people. Assist those who suffer; strengthen those who are downcast; comfort those who mourn; pour out your Spirit of compassion upon this deeply stricken and deeply loved people.

This *Letter from Chile*, written by Brother Alois for the year 2011, was released during the European meeting which brought together 30,000 young adults in Rotterdam at the end of December 2010.

LETTER 2011

Letter from Chile

JOY

A joyful heart, that is your life. Leave sadness behind!¹ This appeal from a believer who lived long before Christ is also meant for us today.

We undergo trials and suffering in our lives, sometimes for long periods. But we always want to try and rediscover the joy of living.²

Where does this joy come from?

It is awakened by an unexpected meeting, by a lasting friendship, by artistic creation or again by the beauty of nature....

Love shown to us engenders a happiness which gradually fills the depths of the soul.³

¹ See Sirach 30:22-23. A Christian of the second century called Hermas likewise wrote: "Put on cheerfulness.... All will live for God who drive away sadness from themselves, and put on all cheerfulness."

² What brings a human life to fulfillment is not spectacular exploits, but a serene joy that touches the depths of the heart. The unfinished and fragmented character of every life, along with the suffering, is not eliminated, but this does not extinguish serenity.

³ The Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann (1921-1983) wrote in his *Journal*: "Joy about nothing concrete, joy from the beyond; the joy of God's presence touching the soul. And the experience of this touch, of this joy (which will never be taken away since it has become the deepest part of the soul) will determine the course, the direction of one's thoughts and one's relationship to life."

And then we are led to make a conscious choice, to opt for joy.

Sometimes those who suffer poverty and deprivation are capable of a spontaneous joy in living, a joy that resists discouragement.⁴

When the Bible repeatedly invites us to be joyful, it shows us the source. This joy does not depend only on passing circumstances; it comes from trust in God: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice.... The Lord is near.”⁵

Christ did not come to found a religion that would be in competition with others. In him, God shared our condition so that every human being might know that they are loved with eternity’s love and so find joy in communion with God. When we believe in him, our eyes are opened still more to all that is human—a mother’s love for her child, the devotion of those who care for the sick.... In these acts of generosity Christ is present, sometimes without being recognized.⁶

Christ brings a radical renewal of human beings. He first lived this new life himself and he struggled to remain faithful. On the eve of his arrest he broke bread while saying these mysterious words: “This is my body, given for you.”⁷ Yes, he is “the Word made flesh.”⁸ He turned his unjust death into a gift of his life. Risen from the dead, he breathed on his disciples to communicate the Holy Spirit, the very life of God.⁹

The Holy Spirit sets the joy of the Risen Christ in the depths of our being. It is not only there when everything is easy. When we are faced with a challenging task, the effort can reawaken joy. And even in times of trial, it can remain buried like embers under the ashes, without going out.¹⁰ In praise,

⁴Years later, I still think of those I met in Haiti when I visited that country with Brother Roger. In that beautiful country people live in utter destitution. I cannot forget the mothers who often did not know in the morning whether they would have enough to feed their children that day. And yet, for most Haitians, even the disastrous earthquake of January 2010 was not able to call their trust in God into question!

⁵Philippians 4:4-5.

⁶See Matthew 25:35-40.

⁷Luke 22:19.

⁸John 1:14.

⁹John 20:22.

¹⁰Father Basil Gondikakis, the abbot of a monastery on Mount Athos, expressed this in a mystical language full of poetry: “With the example and the help of the Virgin, every peaceful and transparent soul, open to the divine will, can become a Mother of God according to grace, conceiving and giving birth to a little joy that transcends death.”

we let it well up in us, and all at once the present moment is illuminated.¹¹

COMPASSION

Opting for joy does not mean running away from life’s problems. Instead, it enables us to face reality, and even suffering.

Opting for joy is inseparable from a concern for other human beings. It fills us with unlimited compassion.

Tasting God’s joy, however fleetingly, turns us into women and men of communion. Individualism as a road to happiness is an illusion.¹²

Being witnesses to communion requires the courage to swim against the stream. The Holy Spirit will give us the imagination we need to find ways of remaining close to those who suffer, to listen to them and to let situations of distress affect us.¹³

The road to happiness, in the steps of Jesus, lies in giving ourselves day by day. Through the lives we live, in great simplicity, we can express God’s love.

¹¹Before his passion, Jesus said to his disciples: “Now you too are sad, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you” (John 16:22).

¹²The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965) wrote: “The Thou meets me by grace—it is not found by seeking. But my speaking of the primary word to it, saying Thou, is an act of my being, is indeed *the* act of my being... I become myself through my relation to the Thou; as I become *I*, I say *Thou*. All real living is meeting.”

¹³Alberto Hurtado (1901-1952) is a Chilean saint, canonized by Pope Benedict XVI in 2005. That Jesuit priest is venerated in his country because of his life given for the poor. He started the “Homes of Christ” where homeless persons, children, women and men in difficult situations are offered hospitality. The theme running through his entire life and activity was this question: what would Christ do in my place? In 1947, he wrote about those who were entrusted to him: “The first thing to do is to love them.... To love them so much that I am not able to stand their sufferings.... My mission cannot be limited to comforting them with fine words and leaving them in their misery while I eat comfortably and lack nothing. Their suffering must pain me.... To love them so that they can live, so that a human life can grow in them, so that their minds open and they do not remain on the side of the road. If we love them, we will know what we have to do for them. Will they respond? Yes, in part...and nothing done in love is lost.”

If our communities, our parishes and youth groups could become more and more places of heartfelt kindness and trust—places where we welcome each other, where we seek to understand and support others, places where we are attentive to the weakest, to those who are not in our usual circle, to those who are poorer than we are.

One sign of our times is the great generosity with which so many people have come to the assistance of the victims of tragic natural disasters. How can this generosity motivate our societies, even in everyday life?¹⁴

As necessary as material aid is in emergency situations, it is not enough. The important thing is to restore justice to the destitute.¹⁵

Christians in Latin America remind us that the fight against poverty is a struggle for justice. Justice in international relations, not aid.¹⁶

We must learn to overcome fear. We are all familiar with that reflex of self-protection which consists in wanting to keep ourselves safe even at the expense of the welfare of others. And it seems to be becoming more pronounced in our day, as feelings of insecurity grow. What can prevent us from giving in to fear? Is it not by reaching out to others, even to those who seem to be a threat?

Immigration is another sign of our times. It is sometimes perceived as a danger, but it is a

reality here to stay which is already shaping the future.¹⁷

A further sign of our times is the growing poverty within rich countries, where abandonment and isolation are often the main causes of economic uncertainty.

Over-accumulating material possessions kills joy. It keeps us trapped in envy. Happiness lies elsewhere: by choosing a simple lifestyle, working not just for profit but to give meaning to life, sharing with others, everyone can help create a future of peace. God does not give a spirit of timidity but a spirit of love and inner strength.¹⁸

FORGIVENESS

The Gospel encourages us to take a further step: justice must go as far as forgiveness; human societies cannot live without it. In many parts of the world, the wounds of history are deep. So let us dare to put an end to what can end today. In that way the future of peace, prepared in the heart of God, can be fully deployed.

Believing in God's forgiveness does not mean forgetting offenses. The message of forgiveness can never be used to condone injustice. On the contrary, believing in forgiveness makes us freer to recognize our own faults, as well as the mistakes and injustices around us and in the world. It is up to us to repair anything that can be made good. On this difficult path we find an essential support: in the communion of the Church, God's forgiveness can be granted again.

¹⁴ During his visit to Britain, Pope Benedict XVI made this appeal: "The world has witnessed the vast resources that governments can draw upon to rescue financial institutions deemed 'too big to fail'. Surely the integral human development of the world's peoples is no less important: here is an enterprise, worthy of the world's attention, that is truly 'too big to fail'."

¹⁵ "It is not your possessions that you distribute to the poor; you are simply giving them back what belongs to them. For you have only kept for yourself what is given to all for the use of all. The earth belongs to all and not only to the rich, but it was expropriated by a few to the detriment of all who work it. So, far from accomplishing acts of great generosity, you are only paying your debt." (Ambrose of Milan, fourth century)

¹⁶ In the final document of the meeting in Aparecida (May 2007), the Catholic Church of Latin America wrote: "Working for the common good means promoting just regulation of the economy, finances, and world trade. It is crucial that the burden of foreign debt be lifted in order to foster investments in development and social spending. Global regulations should be devised to prevent and control speculative movement of capital, promote fair trade and the lowering of the protectionist barriers of the powerful, assure adequate prices for raw materials produced by impoverished countries and fair regulations for attracting and regulating investments and services."

¹⁷ Of course immigration must be regulated, not by fear of foreigners, but by a true concern for their integration. For immigrants, finding housing and work and learning the language are priorities. For host countries, granting rights goes hand in hand with the reasonable expectation of duties. Should not the calling of Christians in this context be to show, by their lives, that fear of the foreigner as a foreigner is not justified? Becoming acquainted and getting to know one another can be a first step in overcoming the fear that comes from ignorance.

¹⁸ See 2 Timothy 1:7.

Upcoming Stages in the Pilgrimage of Trust on Earth

With young people from throughout Europe, Brother Alois and other brothers will go to Moscow from April 20-25, 2011, to celebrate Holy Week and Easter with the Russian Orthodox Church.

The 34th young adult European meeting will take place in Berlin, Germany, from December 28, 2011 to January 1, 2012.

The third international meeting in Africa will be held in Kigali, Rwanda, from November 14-18, 2012.

Messages received for the Rotterdam meeting: see <http://www.taize.fr>

Every human being needs forgiveness just as much as daily bread.¹⁹ God gives it always, unconditionally, “the One who forgives all your sins.”²⁰ Opening our hands in prayer is a simple gesture that can express our desire to welcome it.

When we pray in the Our Father: “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive...,” God’s forgiveness already touches us. They are not empty words: something happens when we pray using those words which Jesus himself taught us. And then we are ready to forgive in our turn, and not condemn another person definitively when we have been wronged.

Christ distinguished between the person and the offense committed. Until his last breath on the cross, he refused to condemn anyone. And instead of minimizing the fault, he took it upon himself.

There are situations where we do not manage to forgive. The wound is too big. We should then remember that God’s forgiveness never fails. As for us, it is sometimes only by stages that we succeed. The desire to forgive is already a first

step, even when that desire remains engulfed in bitterness.

By forgiving, God does more than wipe away the offense. He gives a new life in his friendship, rekindled day and night by the Holy Spirit.

Welcoming and sharing God’s forgiveness is the road that Christ has opened. We move forward on it in spite of our weaknesses and our wounds. Christ does not turn us into women and men who have already reached the goal.

We are the poor of the Gospel; being Christians does not mean claiming to be better than others. What characterizes us is simply the choice to belong to Christ. In making this choice we want to be wholly consistent.²¹

And we can all make this discovery: forgiveness received or extended creates joy. Knowing that we are forgiven is perhaps one of the deepest, most liberating of joys. It is the source of the inner peace that Christ wants to communicate to us. That peace will lead us far; it will radiate outwards for others and for the world.²²

f. Alois

¹⁹ Suzanne de Dietrich (1891-1981), a Protestant theologian who, at the beginnings of Taizé, encouraged Brother Roger and the first brothers not to hesitate to commit themselves in community for their entire lifetime, wrote: “A Christian is someone who lives in forgiveness, who knows that every day he transgresses the commandments of God, but who also returns to God every day and who knows, with invincible certainty, that God will have the last word in his life. Christ has taken charge of him, has taken responsibility for him before his Father. He is not alone in his fight; the one to whom he gave himself will never abandon him. His assurance is based not on what he already is, but on what God is, on the faithfulness and the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. That is why his progress does not blind him and his defeats do not discourage him. He always gets up again because he does not belong to himself; he belongs to another.”

²⁰ Psalm 103:3. This entire psalm sings of God’s forgiveness. And the prophet Isaiah, in a somber period of history, reminded the nation that God always forgives, saying: “I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud...” (Isaiah 44:22).

²¹ “Christians do not merely belong to Jesus Christ as all human beings undoubtedly belong to him, but do so in such a way that the work which Jesus Christ does in the world is also the meaning of their action; the fight which Jesus Christ wages in the darkness against darkness is the cause to which they dedicate themselves.” (Karl Barth, 1886-1968)

²² Seraphim of Sarov, a Russian monk of the nineteenth century (1759-1833), wrote: “Achieve inner peace and thousands around you will be saved.”