



LETTER TO AN AGNOSTIC FRIEND

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First level: the reasoning of the mind.

1. Causality
2. Foundation
3. Meaning
4. My position in consideration of these reasons

Second level: the "arguments" of Jesus.

1. Following Jesus
2. The God of Jesus
 - 2.1. The Crucified
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Open-ended conclusion.

(This really is a letter: it corresponds to no literary genre. It was written at the request of a friend, and is being published in case it might be of service to others. It has been amplified somewhat, and references have been changed which could lead to the identification of the person to whom it was written.)

Dear José Ramón,

I'll try to answer your letter because I feel that you are asking for something you have a right to receive. It's not going to be easy for me though. You ask about my relationship to God as a believer, and you want me to tell you how this relationship evolved: whether there have been qualitative differences as time went on, whether there have been "dark nights of the soul." And whether surviving the latter has strengthened my faith. You say you want "to see through my eyes."

I'm answering your request with one condition: that you will accept from the outset that you have asked me to express the inexpressible - inexpressible not only because of my own limited ability, but because of the subject-matter. If it were possible to express God adequately, it would not be God that was being expressed... The people who seem to speak best about God, the mystics, often end up doing so in verse; and when they try to explicate those verses, their prose becomes hopelessly tangled - like the prose of St John of the Cross in comparison with his poetry.

But perhaps you've heard me modifying on occasion the famous aphorism of Wittgenstein: "It is sometimes necessary to try to say what cannot be said." Your letter has precipitated one of those occasions. I only ask that you take what follows as resembling the attempts of a mentally handicapped child to make itself understood. It's so hard to clue in to what they're saying: only parents and the teachers who live with such children know how to understand; other people can only catch the odd word.

In a letter rather like this one, the poet Leon Felipe wrote to his sister Salud that we do not move from nothingness to nothing, but from nothingness to life, from life to death, and from death to the Mystery. I would like this letter also to end in the Mystery - but to reach the Mystery from this life, not from death. And therefore - summing up even before I begin - I would distinguish three levels in what could be called my experience of God:

The NATURAL level, of being human, in which I end up saying that it would be reasonable and good if God existed.

The level of THE ENCOUNTER WITH JESUS which leads me to conclude that, if God exists, it would be reasonable that God should be as Jesus says God is, and not as I imagined God to be; and, furthermore, it is probably best to trust someone like Jesus in this matter.

And the third level is that of MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE: I embark on this journey, confirming in my own experience, as I travel the road, that which I accepted when I decided to trust in Jesus.

Let's see if I can give some sort of account of each of these three levels.

FIRST LEVEL. THE REASONING OF THE MIND

This level is that of argumentation. The human mind demands (for example, and without pretending to be exhaustive) causality, foundation, and meaning.

1. CAUSALITY

The question of cause may be boiled down to the commonly-expressed feeling that "there must be something." Today for example the experience of computers causes many to ask how this world has been "programmed." For the world does seem, for better or for worse, undeniably to have been programmed in such a way that, like a computer, it can carry on acting alone.

But this question would never lead to anyone's living their lives for this "something." So I shall prescind from this type of argument, out of an elemental respect for God and for your present situation. If God is cause, God is cause in a manner so different from the causalities known to us, that to apply such a notion to God would run the risk of falsifying God by first setting up a scheme of things and then trying to fit God into it. The old argument - "There is no watch without a watch-maker, nor can there be a world without a Creator" who configured the atmosphere from which you and I proceeded - is a good example of this. Without intending to, the argument makes God a PART of this world. And many have ended up losing their faith, simply because they discovered that a part called "god" is not to be found in this world.

2. FOUNDATION.. FOUNDATION.

Foundation is not to be confused with cause; they are not quite the same. The question of Foundation arises when we perceive in things certain levels so unconditionally absolute that we are led to conclude that this condition cannot have its source in the things themselves, which are too relative for that. I'm sure that you've experienced instances of this in your own life: an ethical imperative for example, or a sense of intrinsic worth which commands our respect. Or the experience of authentic love.

Here are some ways in which arguments have been stated, based on the question of Foundation:

a) It was Heidegger who said that **THERE IS NO FOUNDATION; THERE IS ONLY THE ABYSS**. He said it using a striking German play on words: there is no Grund, there is only Abgrund. However, he was then obliged to conclude that technology, for example, has no norm outside of itself. And, therefore, that which serves to construct a concentration camp is as

"normal" as that which serves to construct a tractor. There is no objective and universal justification for electing one of those options over the other. If God does not exist, then everything is a norm unto itself. Therefore EVERYTHING IS NORMAL, INCLUDING CONCENTRATION CAMPS.

But let me expand on this using another example, because it's more commonly known and, I think, less well understood.

b) Dostoyevski, as you know, wrote that "If God does not exist, then everything is permissible." Now I know that people believe that God does not exist, and yet at the same time they feel that not everything is permissible - that there must be limits. Dostoyevski knew that, too. But he did not wish to consider our actions apart from the Foundation upon which we rely in order to function within limits.

Neither did Dostoyevski wish to say that everything is permissible provided there is no "punishment" for excess. Many writers in the philosophical tradition, from St Augustine to Kant, have pointed out that when someone does good out of fear of punishment and not out of love for the Good, that person is not good but merely afraid.

Dostoyevski was thinking of choices such as whether to kill or not to kill, to trample on the weak or not to, to use technology to make a tractor run or to use it to build a concentration camp... These things are certainly different, but they are "equal," just as yellow and red are different but equal, or Tuesday is like Wednesday but different. Unless, that is, there exists a point of reference that is absolute, that establishes the desirability, quite apart from personal taste, of one member of the pair over the other.

The meaning of the sentence seems to be, then, that if God does not exist, and if we manage to think of things STARTING FROM THERE (which is actually almost impossible, perhaps precisely because God does exist) then everything becomes IN-DIFFERENT - even the differences themselves.

We might ask: why on earth is everything not permissible to me (i.e. not of equal importance), if there is no point of reference that is absolute? If reality is like a broken compass, with no North to provide bearings, then what is the point of expecting reality to contain a criterion for distinguishing one direction from another? And if I reason that the absolute point of reference must be the human person - wouldn't I be saying that just because it suits me to think it? How can a person be an absolute point of reference if I and other people are so many, so relative, and in so much disagreement? Once again I would be talking purely of my own preferences, and I would never be able to make others accept them.

c) Let me cite yet another example, taken this time from the writings of a mutual friend whose work we have both just read: "The world is governed not by necessity but by chance. This is a very painful realization, because it forces us to admit the senselessness of our existence. From this point of view everything, from suffering to heroism, is nothing more than blind caprice on the part of the universe, a colossal joke perpetrated by matter."

But then (for I have just said to you that our foundations are one thing and our behaviour another) our friend goes on from there to make a step I cannot comprehend: "That which makes us human, which differentiates us from animals, is precisely that defiant ambition to be happy. To control our lives, and to turn ourselves into our own gods ... IN THIS LIES OUR GREATEST PROWESS: IN FINDING DISORDER'S MEASURE."

Admirable, as far as human greatness goes. But, as it happens, incoherent. For, if there is only chance and no necessity, then the hypothetical disorder cannot have measure, otherwise it begins to cease to be disorder. The "necessity" that seems to rule our reason is only a mirage, a false and subjective illusion to which nothing real corresponds. And that "colossal defiance, our insistence on controlling our lives" and fulfilling ourselves, in fact makes us objectively speaking no more human than whatever or whoever lacks it. For it is, according to the hypothesis, nothing but another blind caprice of the universe, another joke on the part of matter. It is only what has been called "a useless passion."

3. MEANING.

Aside from cause and foundation, human beings pose the question of meaning. The main proof of that is that nothing is so satisfying to us as the experience of meaning. And nothing crushes us as totally as the absence of such experience, or the experience of meaninglessness. It is enough to take away our desire to live - in spite of what we said earlier about the human being as absolute point of reference. Let's go back to examples, because they work best in a letter.

What sense is there in the life devoted to others, or the struggle, of a man as admirable as is Nelson Mandela? What he has done may be pleasing to us; but for him there has been a tremendous price to pay - a price that cannot be justified merely by our admiration. It is even possible to say that Mandela has had great good fortune because he is one of the few who have seen the fruit of their labours. But what sense is there in the lives of the black South Africans who died in prison, or under torture, and who never saw any good outcome to their struggle, as Mandela did? Wouldn't their lives and their struggle seem to be like flowers that never came to fruit, or like beautiful bubbles in a sea of nothingness? A thousand years from now, might it not be that whether or not apartheid succeeded or was overcome in the course of history will come to mean absolutely nothing? Why are we not happy with a statement such as: "It is not scientific to wish that the executioner should not have the last word on his victims"?

Let me repeat to you the question: Does it make any SENSE that such a price should be paid, without our ever knowing whether there will be the smallest success, let alone the FULL success that we yearn for in every struggle? There are two answers, as far as I can see.

Perhaps you remember how one day in class I explained this by comparing Nietzsche's position with a strophe of St John of the Cross, on the "human wound." The strophe begins, "Why have you wounded this heart, not healed it?" And perhaps we must agree with Nietzsche, that here we have "the origin of tragedy": the impossibility of redemption for a being who needs

it because of being created at once finite and absolute. But if that is the case, the only reasonable course would be to follow Nietzsche to the end, into his madness, wouldn't it? Isn't it because of the incredible vertigo that his conclusion produces, that today people try to make life into a mere pastime, and refuse in consequence to enter into any serious "role"? I can understand, only too well. But you yourself once said to me that life can't be a pastime for some unless others pay for it with their slavery. And I believe, José Ramón, that such an attitude would not leave you in peace, not with your openness, your conscience.

But rather, in human struggle, and in that human passion for plenitude, there is a reaching for something akin to what Jaspers calls "a faint glimpse of Transcendence," which he asserts is to be achieved in action out of liberty, and which María Luisa one day said she believed she had once glimpsed in the act of love - what accompanies, in general, all our limited experiences of meaning. Perhaps it has something to do with what Nietzsche says elsewhere: that "ALL pleasure begs for eternity." Not that this is a fact when it is expressed so sweepingly, yet it might be fair to assert that THERE ARE SOME pleasures, or some experiences of delight, which do seem to demand eternity. And poor is the life experience that has never known such.

Here you have what I call Causality, Foundation, and Meaning, which I have tried to describe to you MERELY AS AN APORIA to start with, a place where you and I can stand together. Reading over what I have written, I think that if some Zen master were to read it he wouldn't understand much of it because for him terms like "nothing" or "empty" or "in-difference" would not contain the negative value I have placed upon them, of a "support that gives way" or an "undergirding that snaps." He would understand these terms rather in a positive sense, as constituting a paradoxical mediation that serves to arrive at the all. You see how relative our language is! But you and I are westerners, and I have tried to speak to you out of "the reason of the Greeks," in which I admit that I feel more at ease. But it's not the explanation that should interest you as much as the weight that I give to such arguments.

4. MY POSITION IN CONSIDERATION OF THESE ARGUMENTS

So I shall add a couple of caveats:

a) What has been said constitutes for me neither proof nor demonstration. Perhaps it is, rather, an eternal question, one that is constitutive of human existence.

Taken as a demonstration, the assertion of Causality, Foundation, and Meaning invites very serious objections, because there are in life too many experiences of chance, of relativity, and of meaninglessness. Rather than saying that reason REACHES God, I prefer to say that reason is capable of discovering its need for God, and of realizing that it is its own nature to ask questions about God, since it perceives that without doing so it could not function as reason. At this level then, I conclude only that, IF God existed, His existence would be FINE, and pretty

REASONABLE. Nothing more.

b) But if our reason can go no further than this, the answer to the question posed by human existence cannot be found by FURTHER REASONING! It would be like trying to rise by pulling yourself up by your own hair. Reason - the same power of reason - tells me to "make a leap," or to "move to another level." The moment arrives when one has to choose, when NOT choosing is also an option, and when any option seems equally "likely." What will make one option more likely than another will not come from ratiocination, but from a totally different dimension of our being: a dimension that is ethical or aesthetic or psychological or affective or religious or something else - or all of these together.

Remember what I said in the beginning, about the necessarily INEXPRESSIBLE nature of God. Ever since antiquity people have compared God to Absolute Light. Light, in itself, cannot be seen - but we see everything else THANKS TO light. And as far as God is concerned, helping someone journey towards faith cannot consist of one's pointing out, of one's "making someone see" Light. Rather it is a "teaching how to see," so that a person may be "on the side" of the light, and so see by means of it.

Now it might be possible for you to see what I meant by an option that is "reasonable" and "better."

c) But now I must add, because you asked me to make this letter a kind of confession, that there is something in me that has always resisted accepting this conclusion that I call reasonable and better. For accepting it means demanding of my life levels of seriousness, of respect, of commitment to profundity, that are uncomfortable and exigent - whereas the negation of this conclusion would allow me to live spontaneously, distractedly, superficially, with a kind of animal simplicity even, which would be easier, to say the least.

You'll perhaps find it strange, but this resistance remains within me to this day, and later I'll have to go back to it and discuss it again. Nevertheless, experience has repeatedly shown me that living like that, for comfort and for immediate gratification, has never in the end made me happy. And for me at least, at my stage in life, it is just not possible to keep myself in a numbed state, as other people seem to manage to do - for a while, anyway.

And now I move on to the second level.

SECOND LEVEL: THE "ARGUMENTS" OF JESUS.

I've put the word "arguments" in inverted commas here, because we've moved on, not to new arguments, but to what is truly a seduction - if indeed you can ever formulate a seduction and so, in that sense, make it an affair of "reason." The fact is that, while I was living what I've called the first level of experience, my encounter with Jesus took place. It was, in short, not a "confirmation" of my position, but rather it was a "conversion" of all of it.

If this were a book on theology and not a letter, I would have to explain that it was an encounter with Jesus "and also with the tradition that proceeds from Him," with the Church in which He is alive, etc. But I know your difficulties with the whole idea of the Church, and so, to respond to the request you made of me, I'll stick to the matter of Jesus himself in this letter.

As you know, because you audited my classes, for me there is in Jesus a human quality that seduces me, that stimulates a desire in me to try to be SOMETHING LIKE HIM, and TO TRUST HIM.

1. FOLLOWING JESUS.. FOLLOWING JESUS.

As soon as I want to be "a little like him" I come up against my total inability to be anything of the kind. However -I also find him saying: The Spirit of my Father will help you more than you can imagine possible right now. Take the first steps on the journey, and IT DOES NOT MATTER WHERE YOU END UP. WHAT MATTERS IS THE DIRECTION YOU TAKE.

This has been absolutely essential for my trajectory: through a kind of confidence in Something greater than I am, I've found myself doing many things I'm not able to do. (I experience directly the extent to which I am not able every day, and I've made more than one person realize my incapacity.) It would take too long to recount all this - I'd have to write an autobiography, not a letter, and I have no ambitions in that direction. If you want a hint at what I mean, I'll only say that I could include the crazy, absurd aspect of my life that is my celibacy - and I would add that, despite its enormous difficulty, it has not been for me a dehumanizing sacrifice; that beyond all expectations it has brought me to astonishing depths of human relationship. And all of this I cannot consider to have been my own doing; it's something that has been freely given to me. Furthermore, this gift has uncovered for me new possibilities for human being and human life. I have learned from this what it is that liberation theologians mean when they say that one doesn't know Jesus only by studying him, but by FOLLOWING him.

But in this letter I want to focus more on the second attitude towards Jesus that I mentioned: the TRUST in what Jesus tells me about God. I think this point needs a longer explanation.

2. THE GOD OF JESUS.

It is possible to falsify the revelation of God in Jesus (what Christianity has discovered in him) by reducing it to the revelation of a God who is "the metaphysical summit of Being," utterly unapproachable by anyone. But you can also falsify the revelation by reducing it to the image of a "Father" God. Jesus did reveal God as "Father," but limiting the revelation to this runs the risk of making God a mere sentimental projection.

Here I shall take the time to comment upon the facets of God that were revealed for the first time by Jesus, and ever since Jesus have been included in what human beings mean by "God." These are: the Cross, the Trinity, and the "Kingdom."

2.1 THE CRUCIFIED..1 THE CRUCIFIED.

Christians believe that God, in our world, allowed His Son, "a part of His Being," to die on a cross. You will understand that, if this really is true, then we must reject out of hand all pseudoreligious fixations upon miracles, all beliefs that God extends a "magic hand" into the world, or sends various "legions of angels" to intervene when he feels like it, to change the order of things, avoiding the laws of physics or overriding decisions taken in freedom. A Crucified God is a useless god, a scandal. But you are aware that, for many human beings through the course of centuries, that apprehension of uselessness and of scandal has been the occasion for amazement and for ADORATION. Here it is that the whole history of Christian faith begins.

And this faith knows that the subject of God cannot be IMMEDIATELY linked to the difficulties of this world, as being either "responsible" for them on the one hand, or an "escape" from them on the other. Because, for the Crucified One, God was neither of those things: neither responsible for his condemnation, nor a way out of it. God was only the Force that supported him in it.

There are those who CANNOT believe, because of this scandal of the crucifixion of the innocent. When disbelief occurs exactly like this, and when this scandal is not merely used as an excuse by people who DON'T WANT to believe, then this unbelief seems to me to be of greater value before God than all sorts of comfortable and self-satisfied religiosities. The revelation imparted by the Crucified, for me, is that we cannot believe in a God STANDING APART from this scandal: God is close to it, right in it. And it seems clear to me that if we Christians believed concretely and seriously in the Crucified One, and not in some other vague and generic god, we would look "much more atheist" than we seem to appear. That is what happened to the early Christians, who were branded "atheists," as I am sure you know.

2.2 THE TRINITY..2 THE TRINITY.

But the Trinity means that nothing I have said allows us to see God as "absent from this world" so that we would ALWAYS have to live "as if God did not exist," in the phrase from Bonhoeffer that you quoted in your letter. Or, at any rate, Bonhoeffer adds that we must live like that "in the presence of God," not leaving Him aside.

I suppose this obliges me to try to say more about this "presence" of the God who does not intervene. It is one of the meanings of the Christian dogma of the Trinity of God: that God who is Inaccessible and Far can make Himself silently present, AT OUR SIDE, as something profoundly OURS, in an Expression, an Image that is comprehensible by us: that is the human being of Jesus, "Word" of God. Furthermore, God can make Himself present WITHIN us, in the depth of our spirit, moving us from within and not from without as other exterior stimuli move us: that is the Holy Spirit we proclaim in our Creeds.

I've become a little too complicated, in spite of the struggle you can see I've had by the crossings-out and changes I've made on this page. You will forgive me. But I hope you see that, in order for me to be capable of "exteriorizing" (in order to hold that transparent Image of Himself), God is able to make Himself accessible to me IN REALITY. He does this in human beings especially, who are "created in the Image" of God, as the early Christians put it. And He can make Himself accessible to me "within my spirit," into which He pours Himself out, and energizes what is best in me, as strength, as light, as love, etc. The God so far away before now becomes immensely close, in the best possibility for my brother and for myself. And this amazing experience, which everyone can have and which happens repeatedly to many, is confirmed: it is that what is most profoundly ours is in fact the least our own. Because when God moves us, our liberty in no sense leaves us (as is the case with effects deriving from other causes). What happens is that the experience gives us GREATER liberty. And that is why we fail to notice Him!

2.3 THE KINGDOM OF GOD..3 THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

And this perhaps leads you to see why Jesus, instead of simply announcing God (as religions generally love doing), announced "the Kingdom of God." That is, he proclaimed a HUMAN situation, which presupposes the following two things:

a) The end of all religious "verticality," but also the end of all "horizontality" of a simple atheistic kind. For in this Kingdom of God, God and man coincide, the human unites with the divine, until we reach the extreme, where we hear the Gospels saying that "esteem for a human being is worth more than all the cults and all the sacrifices." In what Jesus called "the Kingdom," there was for him the possibility of an experience of God more authentic than what we think we have attained when we have tasted the Immensity of the cosmos or the Profundity of the self.

b) Such an experience implies further a Kingdom where God is DEPRIVATIZED; the Kingdom makes God "ours." Notice that Jesus does not reveal God as "my" Father, but as OURS. And this deprivatization holds for all of the relationships with God which Jesus describes for us: the

Kingdom comes "to us" (not "to me"); the bread I ask for is "our" daily bread (not mine!); I ask for forgiveness and liberation from evil for "us" and not for myself alone. The relationship with God, which is the most intimate and personal relationship a human being has, is also, for Jesus, something intrinsically communitarian.

All of this was and remains so new that the very churches that claim to follow Jesus still have not managed to take it in. But this fact is not to be taken in isolation; it should be looked at in conjunction with the two previous points. Together they constitute the revolution in our relationship with God that Jesus began within the history of humanity.

I've said all this to fill out what I said before about "trusting what Jesus tells me about God."

3. TRUSTING JESUS.. TRUSTING JESUS.

Because I trust Jesus, I believe that God is what He seems to have revealed Himself to be in Jesus. And what on the whole confirms me in this trust is something you once said: "The thing is too well constructed for me to be able to believe in it." When you said that that day I said nothing in reply, but now I would like to provide a dialectical completion to the affirmation you made then: the thing is so BADLY constructed that it couldn't be man made.

I've had enough contact with human beings to know how we all (myself included) produce our "constructions." All of us. Clever we may be, but it is necessity that comes first, requiring this cleverness from us. A human "construction" would have expected God to save Jesus from death, from desolation, from failure. The incomprehensible thing is that God did not save him. What on earth then is the use of such a God? And the extraordinary thing is that, in spite of everything, God does indeed save him from death, from desolation, and from failure.

Here we touch on the classic dilemma that is intrinsic to any faith that believes it can save: if God is not salvation, then why should I care any more about God than I care about knowing whether there are creatures with four eyes living on another planet? And if God is salvation, then I CANNOT AVOID THE SUSPICION that God might simply be a projection of my own desire to be saved. This dilemma is part and parcel of the concept of salvation itself (it is not part of the concept of God). The Christian answer to the problem, it seems to me, deserves at least to be heard. It is that God is salvation INsofar AS SALVATION IS RENOUNCED. This substitutes (or recompenses) the projection of the illusion with the risk of having to discard it. True salvation for a human being turns then into this impossible command, so typical of Jesus: "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." This advice, I assure you, places us in "pretty much a no-win situation," as my North American friends might put it.

In truth I would not say, José Ramón, that something so strange as God allowing Jesus to die was a simple projection, beautifully created out of our necessity. I see myself rather as drawn to trust Jesus. Because, if this letter must be autobiographical as you requested, I cannot pretend

otherwise than that something in me has ALWAYS rebelled against this way of escaping from the dilemma. For a very long time I wanted God - if God existed - to be a God of life, and only of life. NOT a God of life-through-death. And I must tell you that I sought Him often by pursuing Him as Life only. Until the day I found myself caught in this dilemma: I saw that the "other side of the coin" of God's being your salvation (and Promise of Salvation) is that you have to surrender yourself.

Salvation and surrender do not appear to be naturally compatible. However, if you seek a god who is salvation only qua fulfilment of your own desires, you will encounter only yourself; you will end up saying - as the radio announcer said the other day - that God exists because at the last minute Colombia tied with Germany. This, unfortunately, is the god of most of those who say they believe in Him, and this is what justifies the atheism of most unbelievers. And may you unbelievers never lose this atheism, because we, who call ourselves believers, need it so much. We need it, to bring us up short, to shame us, and purify us.

Good. This is a general outline of what I live with respect to God through following Jesus. But I can't complete this second level without two clarifications. The first is with respect to my own personal trajectory. And the second, I think, could perhaps be useful for your present situation.

4. TWO CONSEQUENCES.. TWO CONSEQUENCES.

4.1 THOSE WHO ARE CRUCIFIED..1 THOSE WHO ARE CRUCIFIED.

The dilemma I mentioned between salvation and surrender, I believe to have been the foundation of that DEBILITATING (!) interest in the poor, which I sincerely hope has marked in some way my life and my theology. Once a person enters this area, experiences occur that confirm one's belief - provided, again, that the confirmation strengthens the vision of "resurrection from the dead" that we spoke of, and does not consist of some triumphant "proof."

For me there have been so many of these confirmations that I have come to understand that even to consider God without any reference to the oppression of the poor is to ask for a god (or to speak of a god) that has nothing to do with the God revealed by Jesus. And it hurts so that I can hardly bear it, that the very Church which claims to come from Jesus can still fall into posturings about God that have so little to do with what Jesus meant. But these confirmations I shall speak of further, perhaps at the third level. For now, I want only to point out their connection with the paradox of salvation and surrender.

4.2 GRATUITOUSNESS.2 GRATUITOUSNESS.

I would like to add now, before moving on to the third level, something which, for me,

reinforces the credibility of the God of Jesus. It's something I believe could be related to your own case.

I cannot deny, because of my experience with people, that there are those who believe because "it's given to them," without their knowing how. (I've known cases where faith has been "given" even in the midst of periods of infidelity - or at least weakness - that have descended into boredom with God or forgetfulness of God's very existence.)

On the other hand, there are people who really want to believe and just cannot, or at least cannot for the moment. And this is probably your case, as it is the case of many other people who are dear to me. When I was younger I came to terms with this by blaming the non-believer. It is something I've had to repent of, not without difficulty, because what I was doing was turning something that could never be more than ONE possible hypothesis into a general rule and a comfortable solution. It is a hypothesis that each non-believer ought honestly to consider - but it is also something that God permits us believers to turn into a weapon to use against you. But here again, trusting in Jesus has taught me something very different.

If God were the God of the churches, then what I have just said - that some are "given" faith without having to search for it, while others cannot manage to reach it - would be something quite unjust. But for the God of the Bible there is no problem at all. The Church seems to need people to believe in God - for the sake of her own importance, as God's representative. The Bible (in which, we say, God reveals Himself) tells another story: the Revelation is that God's love is unconditional. God does not require that human beings should love HIM, but that we should love ONE ANOTHER. This is what God most desires; this is the commandment that "sums up everything."

And, of course, this commandment does not exclude the other, that we should "love God above all things." The latter keeps its validity at least as conditional (that is, IF God exists); while for the confessed believer this validity is absolute. But, although such love is not to be excluded, it is not indispensable. Because, within any unconditional love for others, there is always the energy of a faith-love that overflows, that reaches God himself. This love is what Jesus meant by his famous declaration, "You did it to Me."

I've talked of "unconditional love," and I must distinguish this from what society now means by love, the love you spoke of once when you were feeling depressed: where love is a relation in which when you are weak another takes advantage of it by using you, and making it clear who it is that has the most power; and when the other is weak you take advantage of them in the same manner. And yet we become addicted to this nightmare, and when we are not living it we start to crave it. Needless to say I am not referring to this kind of "love," and of course I was not thinking of you when I brought it up.

Let's go back then to unconditional love and the "implicit" faith that always works within it. This means that the decisive matter is not saying "I believe in God," but rather accepting what Barth called "the meaning of the absolutely transforming fact that God exists." More concretely, this could mean that the EXPRESS faith in God that you seem to be looking for right now, and

that you are asking me about, is not to be sought as a kind of task. There is no point in rushing: it is not as though you were trying to escape from a labyrinth at any cost. It's more like thinking that one day you might meet the love of your life, who will change everything, and so you prepare yourself for that day. The conditional prayer is what is needed - like the one you described to me once, the one that consists of saying only, with your whole being open to possibility, "Lord, if you are there - whenever You like."

I suspect that your "crazy" decision (one that might not look, these days, like a "proper" career), to live at the service of others (with its costs in comfort, in needs, in possessions, in one's own "being with-it,") - I suspect that just this will one day make you see how deeply God is implicitly "involved" in your life-choice, as root and foundation, as plenitude, direction, and meaning - but also as companion and helper. I believe that such a way of life could one day lead you to reach this conclusion. Be prepared for upheavals, though.

However I must add that, if this conclusion is NOT reached, the lack of it is not decisive either. I believe I can assure you of this, on the part of the God in whom I have faith. And I must insist that, if it is true that it is my wish that you should one day meet God, the wish has nothing to do with my own satisfaction in my "pastoral ministry," and everything to do with my friendship for you.

I've felt it important to make this clear, and I've gone on about it longer than I meant to, because in your case (I'm intuiting here, perhaps more than I can justify), it seems to me from my knowledge of you that you are not about to make a decision very soon, and that you will remain in your agnosticism for some time. Neither you nor I are very good cooks, but even we know that some things cook best in a "bain-marie." Perhaps faith is one of them.

Therefore I would like to end this section by adding that, for Jesus, OPEN AND SOLIDARY agnosticism is better (is closer to God) than religion that is closed and owns solidarity with no one. This is the subtlest trick God plays on those of us who presume that we believe in Him. "I have not found so great a faith in all Israel," say the Gospels - in your favour.

Now I am exhausted and I suppose I am becoming incomprehensible. So I'll stop, and continue later - because I still have to explain the whole third level.

THIRD LEVEL: THE REASONS OF THE HEART

It's one day later. I said that when you enter the way of Jesus, a series of utterly incomparable experiences occur which conspire to confirm you in your route. This level can be at the same time what is most convincing and least communicable about faith - a fact that must be infuriating to agnostics, but is also frustrating for believers. Perhaps it is something that is not unique to faith. Perhaps all our greatest, most profound decisions are those that are least capable of being conveyed to others.

Be that as it may, this "experiential confirmation" of my decision to believe is what turns it into something more than mere belief: "Believing that..." becomes "trusting Someone." It really strikes a cord in me to hear one of the first Christians say, nearly twenty centuries ago, "I know in Whom I have put my trust." These, it astonishes me to realize, are the very words I could use of my own experience.

It will seem strange to you, but it is actually in "trusting God" that I lay my wager, even on God's existence. And I recognize that I cannot see how to convey this except by inviting others to try it for themselves. I cannot speak for others, but in my case this "experiential confirmation" is centred on two focal points: prayer, and the experience of the poor.

1. THE EXPERIENCE OF PRAYER. THE EXPERIENCE OF PRAYER.

I would not call myself a man of prayer - let alone one who could teach it. There are others who could show you, better than I, how to pray. However, if you want to know what my experience is in this matter, I think I should begin by saying that I know various ways of praying (or of not doing so).

- I know the quasi-desperation of trying to pray and being sure that one's words are bouncing off a sort of sound-proofed wall, reaching no one.
- I know what classic spirituality used to call "consolation," and sometimes - on rare occasions, but I remember them - I have received it, together with inexplicable tears for which no doubt a psychologist could offer a dozen explanations.
- I know vocal prayer, using words which, I am well aware, serve not to draw God's attention to me, but rather to make me attentive to God. Such words must, therefore, be spoken very slowly.
- I know another kind of prayer without words: a kind of silence that is neither empty nor reflexive, and which is a simple "being there" - but not merely that. It's more like entering a swimming-pool and feeling the water surrounding you, entering into you; it's quite different from encountering an interlocutor OUTSIDE of yourself.

- I know a prayer that is a mixture of both, where only one word, or at the most a few words, are used over and over, and these repetitions are used both to prevent the imagination from wandering and to invite one to silence.
- I know a reflexive or discursive prayer which sometimes, because of my professional bent, is capable of turning into a screed.
- I know a sort of abstracted state where I end up saying stupidly, every now and then, "Forgive me Lord, for wandering off."
- I know a prayer in which I do no more than beg that the Spirit be, because I feel incapable, myself, of being
- or in which I simply want to sing, out of a huge need to express my gratitude
- or in which I "place before God" the people dear to me, and I try to understand that God loves them more than I can.
- And I also know prayer for helping one over the blows of life. For life is full of blows, and one's meeting with God does not dull one's sensibilities. We are often wounded in our sensibility: in our love and affections, in our self-esteem, in our fears - and in so much else. And if these blows are not dealt with at a very deep level they keep inhabiting us and they finally come out in various unpredictable ways: in aggressivity, in our sexual demeanour, in carelessness, in loss of the ability to hope. And if you deal with them by yourself you run the risk of self-justification, or of blaming whatever has hurt you and of turning totally hostile or rancorous. But if you let God help you in your suffering, living it before Him, seeing it with His eyes, you will truly integrate it, and even be able to turn it into a kind of "food" for growth ...

I still have things to deal with in my life, but what's important is not listing all these, but rather the balance that, after many years, has emerged out of all these experiences.

And the strange thing is: I don't really know when I have actually been praying. Perhaps when I thought I was praying I wasn't really doing so, much. And when I've thought I have not been praying I have in fact been doing so. But there have been times, I dare to say, when - I don't know how - I believe I have been in contact with God. What is very clear to me now is that this contact with God, as real as it is, always includes elements (or what are called in theological jargon "mediations") that are not God, and for that very reason these are what are most perceptible to us. That is why it is so easy to deceive oneself when speaking of this subject.

And if I say that sometimes I believe I have felt God's embrace, I must recall what I said in the beginning: that God is like light, which you don't see, but only thanks to it do you see at all. Therefore, things that are "illumined" are not the light, but through them you enter into contact with the light. And for this reason, for me, the primordial experience of prayer appears more and more to be, not that of talking TO God or of directing attention TOWARDS God, but rather of

looking at the world "with the eyes" OF God. I have known the first kind of prayer of course, and I suspect that everybody must use this means. But today I prefer to stay with the second kind: and it is in looking at the world with the "eyes of God" that I believe I have been in contact with God.

And the Our Father itself, the prayer of Jesus, makes most sense to me if I understand it not as things I must say "to God" (in that sense it can become banal and routine), but as what will become true and grow in me if I continue to see the world with the eyes of God. What I said before about the presence of US in the fatherhood of God, is to do with looking at the world with the eyes of God, instead of looking at God with my own sinful eyes. Otherwise the Our Father, simply recited by itself, can become a mere routine.

All this is to say, José Ramón, that this prayerful experience sometimes turns into a confirmation of the option for belief. And I am fully aware that none of this can be got across with mere words. And neither can what follows.

2. THE EXPERIENCE OF THE POOR. THE EXPERIENCE OF THE POOR.

The other element, you'll remember, was the poor.

You know that I am petit bourgeois by class, that I cannot presume to have a bond with the poor, and that, therefore, what I can offer you here is not a torch but a match. But consider: when, as a believer in God, you step into the hell lived by the wretched, or if you open yourself even very slightly to their need, and you find in yourself an affection that is not so much compassion as an unconditional taking of their side (and above all if this happens when you have enough time to burn away all those ridiculous temptations to take centre-stage that we sometimes bring to such moments) - then it becomes evident that, either there is a God who is "their Avenger" as the Bible likes to put it, and another life that restores to them the justice we have taken from them - or there is nothing that is certain, NOTHING, not even if the Pope himself preaches that there is certainty.

This realization has turned into the first of my secure foundations, the necessary basis for all the rest, the ultimate condition for all my other convictions, which cease to be convictions insofar as they recede from this one.

Perhaps you'll argue that this is all projection, of the kind you have always refuted: our life is mortal, our loves imperfect, our knowledge and experience and progress incomplete, our justice wanting ... and so we postulate a Plenitude, precisely because we do not have it. I do seem to be doing this - but there is a difference. For I postulate nothing ON MY OWN BEHALF. The point is not my life, my love, my knowledge. The poor of the earth have taught me that God would be absolutely just if there were another life ONLY FOR THEM, NOT FOR ME. I have to accept (as all believers in God must) that the wretched of the earth take away from us the right to any plenitude whatsoever; and if I dare to hope for another life for myself, it is because I believe there is one FOR THE POOR. They give me one: or God will give me one, through them. And

this faith in definitive justice for the poor cannot be renounced by me without my abdication also from belief in all the other human certainties (that one should do what is right, that torture is wrong, that democracy is valuable, etc.).

This is what the best Christians today call "allowing oneself to be evangelized by the poor." Without receiving the Gospel from them, no one can presume to speak the Gospel. And what happens today among most of the hierarchy of my Church is that it pretends to preach the Gospel without having first gone through evangelization by the poor. The only thing that's happened so far in this regard - except for certain honourable (and maltreated) exceptions - is an attempt to salve consciences with respect to the poor with certain concessions (THEORETICAL ones of course, and very good ones sometimes!) which dispense people from making PRACTICAL CHANGES in their lives and politics. This is disastrous, for then the so-called evangelization is converted into proclamation, not of our Saving God, but of OUR OWN POWER (which is the real meaning, as any semantic analysis could show, of the phrase "implicit affirmation" in most hierarchical documents recently).

A sad show. And I mention it only in passing, for I know very well just how much this proclamation of "our own power" irritates you, and makes faith hard for you, and for many like you, to embrace. Now and in this context I can only assure you that a time comes when this sad reality provokes sorrow - not rage, or rebellion, or difficulty, but rather a gentle sadness that smiles and "lets it pass." But this reality is not allowed to pass with Olympian calm - for I love the Church a great deal and I am not ashamed of saying so. It is allowed to pass only with a calm born of faith, because there is also a faith-ful way of letting something pass: the way of knowledge that "only God is great."

But I've said all this in fact in order to lead up to something else. (It was only that, as St Theresa liked to write of her digressions: "I did enjoy that!") What it was leading up to was that it is impossible to proclaim the truth of God, and even more impossible to say one is defending it, unless one begins with what I called "the first and conditioning certainty": that God is Avenger of the poor; that Jesus is the Revelation of God, having made himself poor, and having identified himself with all the wretched of the earth ("you did it to Me"); that there is Promise of a life and definitive justice for them. This is what plants in me a very powerful conviction, because I see clearly that without it I cannot hold any other human convictions, nor, without it, would it be worth while holding them. (And I do hold them!)

In the anthology I'm collecting, and that we've spoken about, a superb text of Lacordaire will be included, one that sums it up better than I could. He says that the poor person is "a mystery and a sacrament." I don't know if you can see just how fundamental those two words are for a Christian. The Christian affirms an inaccessible Mystery, and also an Access to the Mystery (in the Sacrament). These two words actually derive from one thing, for access to the Mystery is given by the Mystery itself. What Lacordaire says is no less than that: the poor person is the mystery of an almost infinite dignity that has been destroyed (and so pure reason cannot accept that it exists), but which because of that very fact refers directly to God, the only foundation of it.

And that's about it. But I recall your expressly asking in your letter about my crises of

faith or my dark nights of the soul, and whether they have changed me in any way, or have strengthened me as you put it. So let's move on to the last point, which will not be a "level" of argument, but rather a frequent "levelling."

MY OWN PARTICULAR PROBLEMS

I suspect (I've seen this in people other than myself) that in every believer there lurks a part of him or herself that does not believe at all. And anyone who denies it makes me fear that they are in the grips of fundamentalism, or that they are some sort of systems fanatic (the kind that all systems are frantic to find). But I'll indicate two features of the face of doubt that lives in me.

1. THE SCANDAL OF EVIL. THE SCANDAL OF EVIL.

I once had a pretty vertiginous experience of the scandal of moral evil. For some time this aberration exerted so much pressure upon me that I felt dizzy, sick. I simply lost my footing and my sense of direction, and felt I understood nothing, that nothing could shock me again. I don't exactly know whether I questioned God's existence or whether I questioned the possibility of understanding anything, while still accepting God. It's possible that, if I hadn't escaped, I'd have become a Manichean rather than an unbeliever. I don't know.

Even now I have no exact answer to all this. But one thing I learned, and it is what I told you before: belief in the Christian God is not something that arises BEFORE or APART FROM the experience of Evil, or only when there seems to be none about. No, it must begin AFTER and OUT OF such experience.

I don't suppose this will be of much use to you, because today Christians are accused, on the whole, of exaggerating evil, of causing guilt, etc. And I do agree that sometimes we are justly so accused. But, although this won't help you, you asked me what happened in my own case. Perhaps it may enable you to see the extent to which my faith is something that has been "tested to the quick." It is not touched by all the banal arguments we hear today, but it has been brushed by something so enormous that it threatens faith itself, just as it threatens the "small faith" of so many arrogant petits bourgeois in our world.

2. THE PAGAN LEVEL. THE PAGAN LEVEL.

At the opposite extreme, there is something in me which perhaps has to do with what I said at the end of what I wrote on the "first level" in this letter, about how I feel resistance to accepting the "reasonable conclusion" that there is a Foundation and an absolute Meaning. It's something I like to call the "coup d'etat" of the pagan that lives in me.

All the reasonableness simply doesn't "turn me on," and that's all I can say. There's no reason for this, whatever way I look at it. It's got nothing to do, either, with being "able" or "not able" to believe. It's a kind of "not wanting to," that is anterior to "ability." That's why I call it a "coup d'etat" - it's as if a great barbarian rose up within me and dashed all the pieces out of which

my faith is constructed, rudely and devastatingly to the floor.

I don't know whether you've experienced anything similar in other fields of human aspiration. I assume it has something to do with the dark part of all our psyches, with the in formulable laws of desire, with repression which has accumulated and has not been able to turn itself into surrender ... Perhaps it can be explained in St Augustine's phrase, as "a love of oneself that swells into scorn for God." In any case I believe that the possibility of this psychic catastrophe is a perpetual menace for me. Although I must say that the danger seems to be gradually receding.

Others will have suffered other kinds of doubt. I have myself of course, but I think that for me these two threats have been the worst. And, answering your request, I've made this part purely testimonial, more autobiographical than of universal application. And so, enough.

OPEN-ENDED CONCLUSION OPEN-ENDED CONCLUSION

Well, José Ramón, that is more or less what I've amounted to as a believer. There's a lot more I could say, but I can't write more - and probably you can't read more, supposing that you've read this far. There remain nevertheless:

- the experience of gratuity and its relationship to faith (everything we need most in order to realize ourselves as fully human always turns out to be gratuitous. And the minute it loses this freedom and turns into an obligation, it ceases to be fulfilling);
- the experience of death (wouldn't you say that the position that it is unnecessary even to raise the question of another life only underlines how low the "level of life" is for people today, in areas such as ultimate justice, people unconditionally loved, or plenitude of soul? I believe that only if one thinks of death as transformation can it make sense to attempt the impossible: the transformation of this life);
- the experience of guilt and forgiveness (why is it considered "progressive" to silence such language when all our human discourse - not only that of Guerra and Aznar but also that of so many others - seems to be, these days, a series of desperate attempts at self-justification?);
- the enormous difficulty of human relationships (and, even more, of joint action) and the knowledge that we have to go on trying to achieve these, against all likelihood, and without substituting for them authoritarian structures that are oh so effective ...
- and, of course, the whole gamut of studies, historical, exegetical, critical, and so on, to which faith must be subjected. For these, although they can threaten faith, can also purify it.

All these, for me, have to be taken into account as having to do with faith. They are also dimensions of life, and we won't rid our lives of them, no matter how "postmodern" we may be. Insofar as our world tries to smother them, out of a desire for convenience or from gross egotism, in that very measure they are taken up and used by others, under the guise of fundamentalisms of various sorts, or as rampant fanaticism. This situation makes faith very difficult in our day; but I believe that, in such conditions, the agnostic position, provided it is sincerely OPEN, is as good, in God's eyes, as faith.

So I conclude by saying this: you have asked for my experience, and now you have it. NOW I can allow you to say what you once did - that Christianity seems to you to be "too well constructed for it to be true." There is perhaps no answer I can make to the charge. But you do leave open the other door: "Supposing it all fits together so well precisely because it is true?"

I can see that we'll have to talk over this another day. But for now I'd recommend that you drop, occasionally, the arguments and analyses. If you had asked me what, in essence, God is for me, these are the two opposites I'd have asked you to keep in mind at one and the same time: God

is utterly beyond us, yet loves us. Or: He is Mystery most absolute, yet absolutely available to us. The human mind cannot think both ends of the paradox at once: if He loves us so much, he can't be "beyond" us. And so absolute a mystery could never be so close as to be absolutely available.

The human mind cannot hold these opposites together. But perhaps it will have become clear to you that we can only BELIEVE in God. This word "believe" has a totally different meaning when we say it of God, from the way we use it of any human reality. In the past our ancestors explained this very well, AND INCLUDED THE CHURCH IN THE LATTER GROUP - the Church, which so many of you (yes, I know you do) accuse of being more interested in your believing in her than in God.

I would suggest, to simplify matters, firstly that you try to think about the two opposites, as a kind of counterpoint to this letter. Secondly, try always to keep your agnosticism OPEN. And I assure you that - if God exists - He will not ask of you more than this for now. I'm saying this to you "in the name of God."

Only in the end will we find out whether being human was a "useless passion" or not. But at least we can agree for now that it's better that it be a "passion" than a "pastime". Until we meet again,

My best love,

**José Ignacio
Summer 1990**

P.S. I enclose a photocopy of a short Creed that I wrote for myself a few months ago. Its order is the reverse of that in this letter - it moves from the "third level" to the first. I hope it will serve as a summing up.

I believe that Evil exists.

I believe that Evil cannot be conquered by will-power, by strength, by the use of fear, or by punishment. When any or all of these struggle against Evil, they end up being invaded by Evil, turned into Evil by it. And Evil triumphs, brandishing its scandalous power.

I believe that Evil can be conquered only by good.

And I believe that good conquers Evil by suffering it, even by being apparently defeated and destroyed by it.

I believe that this was the way of Jesus, poor and humiliated, rejected and crucified.

And I believe that this way cannot be imposed on anyone, for otherwise it is made counterfeit. It is a way that can only be discovered, freely followed, and never completed. But, when it is followed, it provides proof of what Luther once remarked, that "through the lordship of

His humanity, [Jesus] changes us from unhappy and prideful little gods into authentic human beings."

I believe that in this way, paradoxically, astoundingly, the human being encounters God - a God who (provided that we accept His existence) is much closer than His transcendence and His silence would lead us to suspect.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY arising from LETTER TO AN AGNOSTIC FRIEND.

Agnosticism is a FACT that we meet at every turn, and perhaps we adhere to it ourselves.

It is also a CHALLENGE for people who believe that we can know and enter into relationship with the Ineffable Mystery that is God.

1. Insofar as agnosticism is a FACT that we encounter everywhere:

- Try to describe it. ("Agnostic" means literally "one who does not know.")
- Discuss if you can the various types of agnosticism.
- There is a "closed" agnosticism (which does not know because it wants neither to question nor to search, or because it positively excludes all the existing answers).
- And there is an "open" agnosticism (which does not believe but does not exclude the answer of faith, or which "does not know" but questions and searches).
- To which of these do you think the person to whom this letter was written belongs?

2. Insofar as agnosticism is a CHALLENGE which every mature believer must meet:

- Try to evaluate what motivates agnostics who are conscious of their agnosticism.
- Why can an enlightened believer not lightly push aside the points of view of an agnostic?
- Would you agree that some believers ought to be "evangelized" to a certain extent by some kinds of agnosticism?

3. For that reason, before beginning to comment on the booklet:

- If you are a believer: what would be the main things in your faith experience that you would want to communicate to your agnostic friend?
- If you are agnostic: what would you want to hear about from your believing friend? What questions would you like to ask about his or her experience? And, at the same time, what clichés would you want to be spared when he or she responds?

4. In the FIRST LEVEL the author explains to his friend the REASONING of the mind: a rational human being requires a "cause," a "foundation," and a "meaning" for existence.

- Try to sum up the main ideas that he sets forth.
- Then evaluate these, and see how he himself evaluates them in Part 4.
- Does it not seem to you that people who want to convince others of the existence of God often stay at this first level and do not prepare for movement to the others?
- Can you give examples?

5. In the SECOND LEVEL the writer leaves the area of discussion about reasons (which at times can amount merely to a mediocre mental exercise) and enters that of "seduction" - the seduction of Jesus, who has shown us a God who breaks the classic schemas that seek to circumscribe God. One could almost say: "The God of Jesus is a different God."

- The author says that this seduction cannot be rational. It is important to comment on this before proceeding.
- Follow the drift of the chapter and show:
 - what sort of God the God of Jesus is,
 - what consequences flow from this, and what kind of believer is awakened by this God.
- Which of the following seems to define the God of Jesus better: "close but unknown" or "far but well known"?

6. We must now move to a THIRD LEVEL: that of interior experience which confirms experientially what a person has accepted when deciding to trust in Jesus. The author zeroes in on the experience of prayer, and on service and attention paid to the poor.

- Why does the author place such a high value on prayer as giving access to God, as uniquely and existentially confirming the two previous levels?
- Comment on what he says about the poor. What do you think? Do you think it is possible to have faith without any kind of involvement with the poor?
- Others have reported confirmatory experiences of other kinds. What are they?

7. Briefly enumerate and evaluate:

- what the author calls the scandal of evil and the "pagan level."
- If you are a believer, have you formulated your own difficulties with faith?
- Whether you are a believer or not, now consider to what extent the wishes expressed in Question 3 have been met.

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