

Touched by a Shepherd's Heart

My Personal Encounters with Pope Francis

As the world mourns the passing of a prophetic soul, I find myself quietly holding close the moments I was graced to share with Pope Francis. Since 2015, his life and presence have marked me deeply. In him, I encountered not only the Bishop of Rome but a man of God who embodied authenticity, simplicity, humility, and compassion — not as ideals to be admired from afar, but as the natural fruit of his intimate friendship with Christ and his tender devotion to Mary, the Mother of the Church. I know I am one among millions touched by the Pope's words and example.

There are moments in life when an encounter leaves an imprint not just on memory but on the soul — quiet, sacred moments that become living echoes of God's tenderness. This is what my encounters with Pope Francis have meant to me.

What struck me most was not the weight of his office, but the lightness of his presence — how he carried the burdens of the Church with a joy that seemed to arise from something far deeper than optimism: from faith. These pages do not aim to be a tribute to a beloved leader, but rather a testimony to the kind of grace that passes through a person who dares to be transparent to God's love. It traces how a shepherd's heart — firm and tender — touched my own, awakening a renewed trust in the God who walks with us, often through unexpected encounters.



The First Encounter – A Chapter Illuminated

The first time I met him was during the audience he gave to our XXV General Chapter in September 2015. He chose not to read his prepared speech, but instead spoke spontaneously from his heart. With a father's warmth, he gave us three simple words: *adore*, *walk forth*, and *accompany*. They weren't mere instructions, but seeds. Those words quietly shaped the tone of our Chapter and helped resonate deeply with the spirit of *Evangelii Gaudium*, his call to missionary joy.

A Surprise invitation

In March 2018, I received a call to meet the Pope. I assumed I would join other Superiors General. To my astonishment, I found myself alone with him. Despite my limited Spanish, our conversation was fraternal, sincere, and deeply human. He spoke like an elder brother — candid and caring. After addressing the concern that brought us together, I shared with him the case of a Claretian brother who in my mind was unjustly deprived of his priestly ministry for a past event of his adolescent years before he entered the seminary. I did not ask for his intervention, but only guidance.



The Pope listened attentively. He encouraged me to walk closely with this brother, recognizing the painful consequences of the Church's efforts to become a safe place for all. His compassion was authentic and profoundly human.

The Kidnapping in Cameroon – The Pope's Compassion

Later that year, in the midst of the worsening Anglophone crisis in Cameroon, several of our missionaries were kidnapped while bringing aid to those hiding in the forest. They were tortured for six days. One of them, facing possible death, professed his final vows in captivity — a moment of unshakable endurance in faith. I wrote to the Holy Father, sharing the story and asking for his intervention for the ailing country for peace and reconciliation starting with the country's episcopate. He responded immediately. He was moved, he said, and edified. He asked me to convey his closeness and admiration to our brothers. He also asked Cardinal Parolin to attend to the plea. I heard that a Vatican delegation visited the region soon after— a powerful sign of his solidarity and concern for peace in the world.

Mary's Revolution of Love – A Spontaneous Message

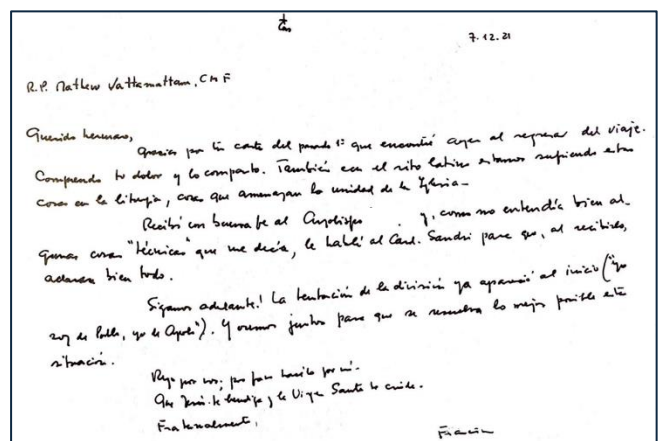
In February 2019, during the Meeting on the Protection of Minors, I found myself again before the Pope. At that time, a Marian Congress was taking place in Rome, uniting congregations devoted to the Heart of Mary. We had requested a papal message, but nothing had arrived. During a break, I quietly mentioned it to him. He thought it had been handled. The next morning, he called me aside in the Paul VI Hall. With a gesture of paternal simplicity, he took my hand, led me to a corner, and recorded a spontaneous video message on Mary's revolution of love. That moment — unexpected, heartfelt — revealed how seriously he attends to small things in between big events and respond generously with love.



A Consoling Father in Times of Pain

In 2021, I faced a situation that weighed heavily on me. An Archbishop I trusted requested help to meet the Pope about a liturgical dispute. I helped, unaware that he intended to use the meeting to undermine his Church's synodal decisions. The Pope received him but directed the matter to the proper channels. The archbishop made use of his visit to the Pope to give credibility to his unethical approval of the interests of a divisive faction which eventually made things worse and created discord and scandal in his Church. I felt betrayed and ashamed. I wrote to Pope Francis, expressing my sorrow and apology.

He replied: *"Dear brother... I understand your pain and I share it with you. The Latin rite also suffers from such issue."*



I received archbishop in good faith, and as I did not understand some of the “technical” things which he told me, I spoke with Cardinal . . ., so that, in their meeting, he would clarify everything better.

Let us move forward! The temptation of division already appeared in the beginning (I am of Paul, I am of Apollo). We shall pray together... I pray for you, please pray for me. Francis”

These words — simple, brotherly — were balm to a troubled heart. They reminded me that even amid the Church’s complexities and internal intrigues, we are called to navigate the path in truth with calmness and tenderness.

Calm Amid the Storm

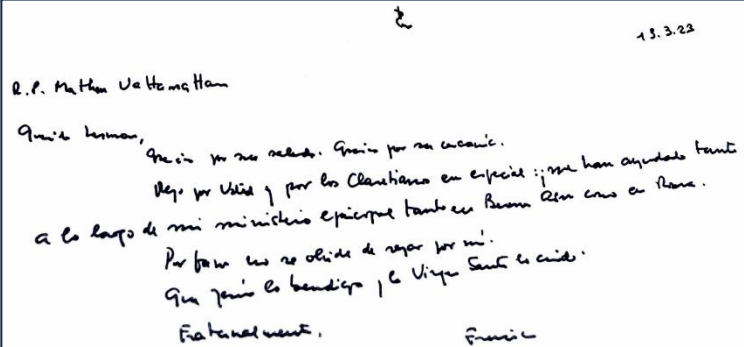
In August 2018, the Church was shaken by the public accusations of Monsignor Viganò, who in an 11-page letter claimed Pope Francis had covered up abuse and even called for his resignation. The media had a field day with the scandal, amplifying confusion and distrust. Around that time, I happened to meet Cardinal Beniamino Stella, who shared the concern within the Vatican about how the Pope might receive such a stinging attack. The atmosphere was tense.

During those very days, Mons. Juan José Chaparro, an Argentine Claretian bishop, a friend of Pope, came to Rome. He got a private audience with the Pope. I took the opportunity to send a note of gratitude to the Holy Father, thanking him for his faithful leadership and expressing the communion of our Congregation with him. Mons. Chaparro later told me the Pope was serene, joyful, and fully himself—not at all burdened or defensive. Days later, I received a handwritten note from Pope Francis thanking me. In the midst of the storm, he walked with the calm of one whose eyes were fixed on Jesus. He knew the art of walking on the water.

An Incredible Attention to Persons

Over the years, I have written notes of affection or congratulations to the Holy Father on important occasions. Each time, I was surprised to receive a brief, personal response—often in his own hand. In 2023, on the 10th anniversary of his pontificate, I wrote once again. His reply was as tender and unassuming as ever:

*Dear brother,
Thanks for your greetings. Thanks for your closeness. I pray for you and especially for the Claretians: they have helped me all along my episcopal ministry in Buenos Aires as well as in Rome. Please do not forget to pray for me. May Jesus bless you and the Holy Virgin look after you!
Fraternally,
Francis*



Handwritten note from Pope Francis to R.P. Matthew Valtierra, dated 13.3.23. The text is in Spanish and expresses gratitude for the Claretians' support during his episcopal ministry in Buenos Aires and in Rome. It concludes with a fraternal greeting and the signature 'Francis'.

R.P. Matthew Valtierra

Querido hermano,
Gracias por sus saludos. Gracias por su cercanía.
Muy por Usted y por los Claretianos en especial: ¡que han ayudado tanto
a lo largo de mi ministerio episcopal tanto en Buenos Aires como en Roma.
Por favor no se olvide de rezar por mí.
Que Jesús lo bendiga y la Virgen Santa lo cuide.
Fraternalmente, Francis

In his simplicity, he always met the person before the title, the heart before the protocol.

Appreciation for Claretian Audacity

On May 6, 2022, during his conversations with Superiors General, Pope Francis spoke about clericalism and ideological rigidity within the Church. In an unexpected moment, he pointed toward

me and publicly appreciated the Claretians for the bold choice of inviting a woman religious, Sr. Jolanda, to facilitate our General Chapter. He saw in that gesture not just innovation, but fidelity — a way of welcoming the richness of diversity and building the Church through complementarity. It was a gentle affirmation that walking together is not a slogan but a mission.

An Unexpected Phone Call

On March 4, 2022, a call came to our General Curia from someone claiming to be from the Holy See, saying the Pope wanted to speak with the Superior General. Since I was returning to Rome from a program, and the request seemed unlikely, those at the Curia hesitated to give out my number. But when I arrived, another call came — this time directly from the papal office — and I was connected to Pope Francis.

I was caught off guard, unsure how to respond to such a personal and unexpected call. With his usual simplicity, the Pope shared that he needed the service of a Claretian for an ecclesial task and wanted me to be aware as I considered future assignments.

That brief exchange left a lasting impression. It reminded me that discernment in the Church must involve a respectful dialogue between the universal and the local. When broader ecclesial needs engage with the concrete realities on the ground, discernment bears wise fruits of synodal journey.

Joy — A Gift of the Spirit on His Pontificate

During another meeting with Superiors General on November 24, 2016, someone asked the Pope about his serenity in the face of criticism and overwhelming responsibilities. His answer was deeply personal. He shared that, during the conclave, after his election, he received a grace — the grace of joy — as a gift of the Spirit. It was not a strategy or a decision. It was a gift he received to carry the burden of the Church with lightness of heart. That joy, he believed, was a sign that he was never alone.

My Last Encounter with Pope Francis

On May 31, 2024, I had the unexpected grace of a final personal encounter. I had accompanied Cardinal Aquilino Bocos driving him to his scheduled meeting with Pope Francis at Santa Marta. As protocol required, I remained in the reception room while he went in. But suddenly, the guard came and called me. To my surprise, I was ushered into the Pope's room, where he was conversing with Cardinal Bocos.

The Pope greeted me with a warm gesture, inviting me to sit with them. When the Cardinal remarked that only he was authorized by the security for the meeting, the Pope chuckled and replied, "They are more papist than the Pope!" With that, the tone was set—fraternal, familiar, deeply human.

We spoke about the concerns of the Church— vocations, formation, family life. I shared with him the conclusion of our Jubilee year



and our new missions in Madagascar and South Sudan. He encouraged us, saying, “*You must never lose your missionariedad—your missionary spirit.*”

As we parted, he handed us some rosaries. Though visibly tired, his face bore the peace of one who dwells in God. That simple, familial conversation remains etched in me—not because of titles or protocol, but because I felt, once again, like a brother.

And I thought: if the man chosen to be the Holy Father makes someone like me feel so at home as a younger brother, then I can dare to hope that, when my time comes, the Father in heaven will receive me too — not with judgment, but with joy, saying: “*You are my beloved son.*”

Farewell from the margins

I received the news of Pope Francis’ passing while visiting the small Catholic community of Panite in Indonesia — a humble mission nestled within a predominantly Protestant region. My heart longed to be in St. Peter’s Square, to bid farewell to a beloved shepherd. Yet, as I stood among simple people and joyful missionaries in this remote mission, I realized I was exactly where he would have wanted a missionary to be — in the peripheries, among the people, where the Church is alive and God is near.

Though far from Rome, I feel deeply united with the grieving Church together with the millions in the peripheries. Standing here, I understand more clearly what Pope Francis had so often reminded us: that the voices and views from the peripheries are not marginal, but essential as beautiful and significant expressions of the soul of the living Church. Without the perspective from the margins, the Church runs the risk of losing its missionary mystique and falling into worldliness.

From here, we are connected with Rome with a spiritual chord. From this sacred edge of the world, I give thanks for a shepherd who helped us rediscover the Gospel from the margins — where the Risen Lord is alive and active.

- Mathew Vattamattam, CMF