

# **The Intimate unit of All: Discovery of my Vocation to the Church**

## **Laudato Si' Week 2020**

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There are two sentences in this document, and this week, that allowed me to question myself deeply, activating my “palautian gen”, the one we bring inside of us from the moment of our conception. The first one is about the theme of this week, “Everything is connected”. Such palautian words! It could be an actualized sentence of the mystery revealed to Francesc; and I’m not putting it out of context of its original meaning, the one about ecology, but I understand it from the mystery of unity of all men and women, all united to Christ, and all united and interdependent with nature, with universe and with all. Let’s remember that Palau in his personal diary, My Relationships, was discovering how, step by step, the nature is participating deeper and deeper in the mystery that is being manifested continuously, towards this universal communion where everything that went out of God in creation will return to the intimate unity with Him. The second sentence can be found in the number 49 of this Encyclic: “the true ecological questioning becomes always a social questioning”; the interdependency among all being is such, that the form in which we live affects not only the nature, but also ourselves; that’s why our mission of recovering the beauty of the Church is not only towards persons, but also towards preservation of creation, so it could serve as sustenance to other persons and communities. As I’ve said before, my palautian gen got activated with both sentences. And because today it’s impossible for me to see things with different eyes than the ones of this charism, they resounded strong inside of me, inviting me, like Palau, to revise my life in this spirit of interdependency and care for all. This way, clarity appeared and my particular vocation presented herself to me, as if the Church herself would tell me: I was always here. I’m a professor, teacher of the history. To be a professor of history in Chile is complicated, given that the market of labor is collapsed. It’s a cheap career to be implemented in a neoliberal system where education is privatized to the maximum possible expression. It’s true that when I chose my career my first motivation was because I liked history, but as time went by I realized that what I desired was to be teaching, to make others feel the vibe I felt learning from the past; it’s how I decided that I would give myself entirely in teaching profession, even though it would mean, romantically, to die doing it. I started to teach in different schools, breaking schemes, innovating, risking it all for a significant didactic; nevertheless, after some years, I found myself unemployed and

without possibilities. It was not just “some time”, it lasted almost three years. Depression, frustration, appeared with strength; the whole project I had planned for my future was reduced to nothing. But suddenly and without looking for it, one opportunity arrived and I was selected to become a teacher. Where? In a place I would never imagine: a center of reclusion for minors, in other words, in a jail for the young. The objective was to collaborate for these young people to finish their studies. According to the law of my country, every young person under 18 in conflict with the law, depending on the gravity of each case, can complete his/her confinement on controlled freedom or in reclusion, in specialized center for reinsertion. Even when they become 18 during this time, they will continue in the same center, being even 25 years old. I said yes, because of two reasons: I needed this job and it seemed to me beautiful to be able to serve there with my vocation. The truth is that the romantic part of this decision passed away quite fast. That center was far from being a center for reinsertion. The installations were not adequate and maintained, the young lived in some kind of “houses”, other isolated, sometimes they were victims of violence by those who meant to taking care of them, many times we could see them affected by drugs, even though it was prohibited. Not all members of staff were responsible in their tasks; and the system itself was easy to get wronged; besides there was this weight of the customs that those who were trying to make some changes were easily marked, rejected, isolated or not allowed to work anymore. By the other hand, I wasn’t working with the young that was poor, marginalized of society, vulnerable and undefended. In reality, they were far from being thirsty of knowledge, wanting to change their lives, that I was expecting; they were the ones making others vulnerable who, if they only had an opportunity, would affirm themselves over those weaker than themselves; they were boasting of their crime as if it was something to be proud of: to burn a house in act of vengeance hoping that a person who had offended them was inside, to tie and kidnap other’s mother tying her to a chair and cutting her with a knife; to kill a conductor of a track who offered himself to give them a ride only to get a pack of French fries; to steal whole salary of their mother to have money for drugs; a transgender girl who was in prostitution since she was 10 stealing from her clients (and she would say all the details of those men married and with families); to participate in “mexica-

na" to steal drugs; and many others. The hardness of their reality and subculture was only the first impact. In all these cases, there was a negligence of the parents; sexual market of children that was difficult for them to assume, as they were talking about it; parents who would send them to steal requiring that they couldn't come home, or wouldn't eat, if they wouldn't bring money; and other cases when they were abandoned and to steal was the only way to survive. To know their stories was to get broken by human misery: not this kind of misery of the innocent poor, but of those who were staying there because they harmed someone else, even took their lives. A singular case was the one of one young man rejected by all other centers; he wasn't allowed to walk, talk or move freely; he has a space on the wall, marked by his companions, where he was obliged to stay. He committed the worst crime possible for them, that could never be forgiven: rape; he sexually abused his two nephews of 3 and 5 years. He had serious cognitive problems that had never before been attended and, what nobody was telling, his mother when he was 5 years old gave him to one bus conductor as "helper", which in reality were sexual favor of all kind, in exchange for some money at the end of the day. In all of them there were transversal aspects, not conscious, but persistent in every case. The poor, that's what they were, the poor. Of all the cases I knew since I was working with those young people, only once I got to know two young who couldn't be classified as such. The rest of them, only few of them were living under the line of poverty, all of them were living at the margins of the cities, they had transgenerational conflictive compromise which was transmitted from parents to children again and again; without services, enough support and being commonly teenage parents. More, all of them were expelled from school for the reason of absenteeism, behavior or others; some of them descending from good schools up to the center of studies for two years to finish the inefficient program of rescolarization. The majority of them finished up to fifth grade. What I was doing there? How did I arrive there? Many times to "intervene" meant to fight just to be able to finish one class, in a dirty and bad-smelling place, with the young fighting among themselves, shouting at me, offending me, pointing that I was a "perkin" (a servant) working for money, that the "hampa" (the world of crime) is what makes a person worthy. How did I pass from teaching history of the European politic thinkers to teaching a young man how to write his name while he was offending me or trying to steal my pencils and notebooks? How come that I was prepared for 5 years in different historiographic movements in America only to end teaching to count, add or subtract? All of this awakened my vocation to the Church; not in the sense of the style of life, like in consecrated life, but like in the world, as a lay person. Everyday I had to stop in the middle of the highway and walk 1,5 km to the Center, located in rural zone isolated from all, to work there. While walking, I used to think about all this stuff, or I was becoming conscious of a stomachache that I experienced only thinking in arriving in this place. But one day, while I was walking, I understood it all: I was there for the Church. In one way or another I understood that I was there because of a profound calling of the Church, of this God-Relation, to whom I was

crying by night looking to serve Him, imagining that I was a missionary in Africa or talk-giver in Europe. Nevertheless, my call was to be here; in the middle of all this pain. But why here? In some way I understood that those young people were just like me, they lived in the same towns where I grew up y played, but they didn't have anyone to take care of them and protect them like I had. I also understood that they were me. But, at the same time, I felt a deep calling to heal this damaged body, wounded body, a body to which state I myself collaborated; many times, with my silence, omissions, discriminations, pretending not to hear, and even with concrete actions. And now the Church was giving me an opportunity to remake this error for my body, Her body, the body of Christ that I made like this; as individual, as society. I understood, without realizing it, the deep meaning of the theme of *Laudato Si*: "Everything is connected". And my way of teaching, this untiring task to teach to those who don't want to learn, to offer them rights and opportunities stolen from them, became my field of action. It became my way of talking about God without mentioning Him (it was a job paid by a government, and we were not allowed to make any kind of religious proselytism). I was there, together with others, fighting for those for whom nobody else wanted to fight, for whom nobody loved, for whom were said to "Go to prison! Close them there!". And in spite of all this, I was able to see persons in them. I learned not to get scandalized. My work was my civil instrument of evangelization; it was my way of fighting for justice, my form of taking care of all this interconnected world that I discovered. Because I understood that changing the economical model, the way we were living, was impacting directly the life of others, and in the life of those young people and their children, who were arriving there every Wednesday at 4 pm making long lines to enter and visit them for few hours, my presence was collaborating in this ambiantal questioning that was always becoming social questioning. I also understood that 80

This epiphanic discovery didn't make it all change, the truth is that everything continued just the same, sometimes even worse; from that moment 5 young man died in arguments, stabbings and other circumstances. Although after years the prison proclaims you worthy for your experience, and it makes it a little easier. But I did change; inside of me. I already knew from where to do the things, why to do them, why I was swallowing my tears when seeing them throwing everything on the floor shouting that it was useless, why I was teaching them if their were useless only for stealing and killing; why I was visiting them in their houses when they already left the Center convincing them not to abandon their studies again; why I was celebrating with a big feast their small achievements: like when one of them learned to read when he was 18, or when the other learned to write his name when he was 23; or that one who offered me protection on the streets; or those whom I still sometimes encounter and they greet me with affection, even though sometimes I don't recognize them.

Today I don't work anymore in a close center, but with those in controlled freedom; it's the same population, the same situation. This mission had its costs; they told me I had lost my sweetness I used to have before, so I started

to look for it to make it come back to me. But it is clear for me that my actions collaborate directly in the purpose of Laudato Sii; I don't part from ecology toward social change, I go in opposite way; I'm sure I'm collaborating slowly and invincibly in a new style of living; a new style of healing the Body of Christ; that they may not lose totally the beauty of a child, which was stolen from them. At the present we live in the context of pandemic of COVID19; I heard many times these days that hopefully it all will pass so we can go back to our normal way of life. I don't want to be back to normal; all that is happening today isn't provoked only by coronavirus, but it's the evidence that already before there were serious problems with our global society; this illness made them only visible. It's not time for everything to go back to normal, it's time to do it well. And we as Christians have the most relevant role that before we were not able to assume totally, but now we have this new opportunity and I believe we can do it. To heal the Church, to heal humanity, to heal the earth; three sentences of one and same action.