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THE LOSS — OF — FAITH

REALITY
OR FICTION?



—✙— Господи, укрепи веру нашу —✙—

ARCHBISHOP BASIL

ARCHBISHOP OF SANTIAGO AND ALL CHILE

These pages were written for those who seek without finding, found without seeking; they say they love, but they hate; They say they hate, but they love. To those who are looking for an answer that is clearly not in these pages and that they will only find inside.



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Chapter I: Empty Sounds.

The echo of footsteps inside the central nave of the cathedral no longer produced the same shudder as before. For Father Thomas, that constant sound—the impact of worn leather on cold marble—had been for years a form of prayer in motion. Today, however, it seemed to him the hollow noise of an oversized space, a gigantic vault designed to amplify voices that no one was there to hear anymore.

It was six o'clock in the afternoon on a Tuesday.

Twenty years ago, at that same hour, the wooden pews creaked under the weight of dozens of faithful who sought refuge after the working day. Now only three people remained scattered in a half-light barely interrupted by the flickering light of a pair of synthetic wax candles: an old woman in the third row, an exhausted man dozing in the background, and Thomas himself, holding a breviary that suddenly weighed on him as if it were made of lead.

"Faith is not lost, Thomas," the bishop had told him weeks before, during an austere dinner in which the wine seemed more bitter than usual. It is eclipsed. It is the spirit of the times; The noise of the modern world deafens the sheep.

But Thomas was not sure that this astronomical metaphor was accurate. An eclipse is a passing shadow, an external and inevitable phenomenon. What he observed every day in the parish was more like slow erosion, a systematic wear and tear caused not only by the wind outside, but also by corrosion from within.

When he needed to breathe, he went out into the street without his clerical collar. He walked through a crowd connected to his screens, immersed in the urgency of consumption, productivity and hyper-individualism. To that society, the idea of a distant, punishing God was simply irrelevant. The answers that used to be sought on the altars were now found in search engines, in self-help algorithms or in the permanent anesthesia of social networks. Why ask for a miracle when you have the illusion of controlling everything from your pocket?

However, it would have been cowardly to blame the time alone. Tomás knew this well. The crisis was not only a symptom of modernity, but also the inevitable response to an institutional wound. The Roman Church, the very one to which he had given his life, had spent too much time entrenched in moralizing, alienated from compassion and suffocated by its own scandals of power, corruption and complicit silences. Coherence had been demanded of the faithful while too many pastors lived in impunity. People had not stopped looking for the sacred; he had simply learned to distrust intermediaries.

He stopped in front of the large oak door and looked at the neon-lit square.

Was the loss of faith a tragic reality or a fiction born of the melancholy of an institution that saw its former spiritual monopoly vanish?

Tomás closed the breviary without finishing the reading.

Perhaps faith was not dying, he thought, but shedding its skin. Perhaps the stone temple needed to be completely emptied so that the real search could begin again in the mud of the street.

Chapter 2: The Scent of Ancient Incense.

Mateo was not just any parishioner.

For years it occupied the second pew to the left of the cathedral. An architect, thirty-five years old, with a serene gaze and inexhaustible curiosity, he did not limit himself to attending Sunday Mass. He would almost always stay a few minutes after the celebration to talk with Father Thomas about theology, history, sacred art, or any other subject that would end up leading to God.

That is why his absence hurt more than the emptiness of the anonymous benches.

First he stopped receiving communion.

Then he stopped attending.

No one gave too much importance at first. People disappear from parishes every day. They change neighborhoods, jobs, schedules... or they simply stop coming back. But Thomas knew Matthew too well to believe that it was a temporary distraction.

One rainy afternoon he met him by chance at the other end of the city.

He had just emerged from a small church crowned by a golden dome that stood out discreetly among the aging buildings of the old quarter: the Orthodox parish of St. John Chrysostom.

Tomás did not enter.

He waited under the eaves of the building across the street while the few faithful slowly left the temple after the Divine Liturgy.

Mateo was the last to leave.

Seeing him, he smiled with sincere joy.

"Father Thomas... I didn't expect to find him around here.

"I didn't imagine meeting you either.

The response was accompanied by a tired smile.

"I haven't seen you in the cathedral for months. I guess you found something here that you couldn't find with us anymore.

Matthew did not respond immediately.

They just walked to a small café in front of the church. The steam rising from the teacups seemed to draw an invisible boundary between the two: on one side, a Roman priest exhausted by the wounds of his own institution; on the other, a former parishioner who had decided to take another path without having abandoned the faith.

After a few moments of silence, Mateo spoke.

"I didn't leave out of rebellion, father.

He kept his gaze fixed on the cup.

"I left because I felt like I was suffocating.

He took a slow breath before continuing.

"When new cases of covert abuse and financial scandals in the diocese began to come to light, something broke inside me. I know sin exists everywhere. I never expected a Church made up of perfect men. But I did expect repentance. What I found was bureaucracy, carefully worded communiqués, and a troubling inability to look at the victims first.

Thomas remained silent.

Not because I disagreed.

But because he had been asking himself the same questions for too long.

"But you didn't stop looking for God...

Mateo looked up.

"Never.

A hard-to-explain peace appeared in his expression.

The first time I attended the Divine Liturgy I was not looking for arguments. Nor a new religious confession. He sought to find the sacred again.

He smiled with a certain nostalgia.

"Everything was different. Incense. The icons. Singing without instruments. Silence. No one seemed concerned with making the liturgy more entertaining or current. No one was trying to convince me that the Church could be like the world so that the world would accept it.

He paused.

—For the first time in a long time I felt that I was entering a place where time did not run.

Tomás listened without interrupting.

"And then I met Father Gabriel.

Mateo smiled again.

"He's a married priest. He has three children. When I talk to him I don't have the feeling of being in front of an ecclesiastical official or a distant authority. I am talking to a man who knows the joys and fatigues of a family. That lives among its people. That accompanies before teaching.

Tomás recalled ancient patristic texts read during the seminar.

"As in the first centuries..."

"That's what I thought.

Mateo nodded.

—Orthodoxy didn't feel like discovering something new. It felt like returning to a very old house that had never stopped being there.

Silence settled again between the two.

This time neither felt the need to break it.

As he said goodbye, Matthew shook the priest's hand with the same affection as always.

There was no rancor.

Nor desire to convince.

Just gratitude.

Thomas watched him walk away down the damp street as the golden domes reflected the gray light of the evening.

He understood then that Matthew had not abandoned the faith.

He had gone in search of a place where he could still breathe it.

When he returned to the cathedral, the echo of his footsteps accompanied him again through the immense empty nave.

He stopped in front of the old wooden crucifix.

For a few seconds he gazed at the serene face of Christ.

The question was no longer whether the world had stopped believing.

The real question was how long an institution can survive when trust begins to abandon it before its faithful.

Chapter 3: The Last Table

The light of nine o'clock in the morning slanted through the side stained glass windows, drawing red and blue stripes on the polished oak benches.

Thomas wore the green chasuble of Ordinary Time. As he adjusted the cincture around his waist, his hands did not tremble; however, the weight of the fabric seemed definitive to him. It was the last time he was dressed to preside at the Eucharist in that cathedral.

He had not announced his departure through the parish bulletins or from the ambo. The curia had asked him for "discretion," the usual euphemism to avoid uncomfortable questions. Even so, the rumor of his resignation had spread in murmurs throughout the week.

That morning the pews were not as empty as usual.

About thirty people occupied different places in the central nave.

There was Mrs. Elena, in the front row, holding her worn rosary with her knuckles deformed by arthritis.

Three rows behind sat Mateo. He had returned for a single day to the old cathedral to accompany him in his farewell.

When the time came for the homily, Thomas did not go up to the pulpit or stand behind the marble ambo.

He descended the three steps of the chancel and stopped a few meters from the first pew.

For years I spoke to you from here about fidelity, forgiveness and hope. I asked them to trust God and to seek the Kingdom in the midst of a noisy and confusing world.

He paused briefly and looked over the tired faces in front of him.

"Today I must confess something that perhaps many already intuit. I've been looking too. And, in that search, I understood that I cannot ask them for coherence if I myself stop living it. I am leaving, not because I have ceased to believe in God's love, but because I can no longer serve a structure that has confused the safeguarding of

the Gospel with the protection of its own privileges and impunity.

A barely perceptible murmur ran through the ship.

Mrs. Elena discreetly wiped a tear with the edge of her handkerchief.

"Faith does not dwell in stone vaults or ecclesiastical titles. It dwells in truth, in compassion and in the ability to look the other in the eye without duplicity. If this institution has lost its way, do not allow your souls to lose it with it. Look for the sacred in the simple, in justice and in the embrace of those who suffer; far from the altars that forgot what they were raised for.

During the Eucharistic liturgy, each gesture had an almost sacramental slowness.

In pronouncing the words of consecration, Thomas did not think of the curia, nor of the bishop, nor of the canon laws.

He thought about the fragility of the people in front of him.

When he distributed communion, he held the gaze of each of the faithful. He no longer

delivered the Bread as an official of the cult, but as a brother who bids farewell to those who have shared the same table.

At the conclusion of Mass, he did not return to the sacristy with his head bowed.

After imparting the final blessing, he took off his chasuble and alb in front of everyone. He folded them carefully and laid them on the altar.

He was dressed only in dark trousers and a simple street shirt, without the clerical collar.

He walked towards the exit.

In the atrium, Mrs. Elena came over and took her hands.

"Thank you for not lying to us, father.

His voice was barely a whisper.

"May God be with you wherever you go."

Matthew was waiting for him by the great oak door.

There was no need for speeches.

A long embrace and a slight nod were enough to express an understanding that no longer needed words.

Thomas crossed the threshold of the cathedral and went out into the square.

The crisp morning air beat down on his face.

Behind him, the bells remained silent.

In front of him, the city continued to beat with the indifference of every Sunday: oblivious to dogmas, oblivious to farewells, but full of real lives waiting to be lived without masks.

Chapter 4: The Broken Kaleidoscope and the New Altar

A year after leaving the cathedral, Tomás worked in the library of a municipal historical archive. His hands, which had once held silver chalices, were now restoring manuscripts worn out by time. He didn't miss the cassock. In the simplicity of his new routine he had found an inner peace that the ecclesiastical bureaucracy had denied him for more than a decade.

One autumn afternoon, Mateo invited him to coffee. He wore a fuller beard and sober clothing; In his gaze persisted the tranquility of one who has found his port, but also a new gravity. He was concluding his studies in pastoral theology and preparing to be ordained a deacon within the Orthodox Church.

"I will soon be ordained a deacon," Matthew said as Thomas poured tea. And things look very different from the inside.

Thomas smiled with sincere joy.

"I congratulate you. I know your search was genuine. How do you experience this step?

Mateo remained silent for a few seconds before answering.

"With reverence... but also with a lot of realism. When he was still in the Roman pews he saw Orthodoxy as a mystical oasis, almost untouchable. Now that I study its history and its theology, I understand something different: the distance that separates it from Rome is much deeper than I imagined.

Thomas slowly rested the cup on the plate.

"Is it that deep?"

"More than it seems. We are not simply talking about administrative differences. We are talking about two different ways of understanding what the Church is.

Thomas waited.

"For Rome," Matthew continued, "unity necessarily passes through the Bishop of Rome. The Papal Primacy and the universal jurisdiction of the Pope are essential elements of his ecclesiology.

Tomás nodded.

"While the East...

—... he lives from synodality. No bishop rules over the whole Church. The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople retains a primacy of honor, a *primus inter pares*, but never a universal authority over the other patriarchs.

The former priest was silent for a few seconds.

—Two models that are difficult to reconcile.

"And that's only part of the problem."

Mateo took a sip of tea before continuing.

"There is also the Creed.

Tomás smiled wistfully.

"The *Filioque*."

Many think that it is only a matter of adding three words. But for the East, this modification alters the traditional understanding of the Trinity, as it was transmitted by the Fathers of the Church and proclaimed in the Ecumenical Councils.

Silence settled again between the two.

Tomás looked out the window at the leaves that the wind was spinning on the sidewalk.

"So... what place do the efforts of Patriarch Bartholomew to get closer to Rome occupy?

Mateo reflected before answering.

"Your intention is sincere. He seeks dialogue and wants to alleviate a wound that has been open for almost a millennium.

But not everyone shares that path.

Mateo slowly shook his head.

"No. A large part of the monasticism of Mount Athos views these initiatives with enormous suspicion. The same is true of important sectors of the Moscow Patriarchate and other Orthodox jurisdictions. They fear that any rapprochement will involve sacrificing essential aspects of the faith.

Thomas sighed.

So the problem has never been political.

"It never has been. Diplomacy can bring people together. But Eucharistic communion can exist only when there is the same faith.

Thomas remained thoughtful.

Rome seeks unity under the same see.

"Whereas Orthodoxy understands that unity is born first of all from complete fidelity to the apostolic faith," Matthew concluded. Sharing the same chalice is a consequence of that unity, not its starting point.

The old priest smiled with some sadness.

"And in the meantime, the common believer is only looking for a place where faith is not stifled by power.

Mateo nodded without answering.

When he said goodbye that afternoon, Tomás saw in his former parishioner the continuity of a flame that had not been extinguished, but had simply changed its candelabra. He understood that he had not lost faith; he had only found another home to guard her.

The conversation did not end there.

Days later, Mateo invited Tomás to his small apartment. The place smelled of freshly ground coffee and old books. On the dining room table

rested several maps, notebooks and bilingual editions of the Fathers of the Church.

As the afternoon began to get dark, Mateo unfolded a large map of the American continent. Small red crosses were scattered from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego.

"Look at this.

Tomás adjusted his glasses.

—What do they represent?

"Parishes."

He ran his finger across the map.

—Chicago. Dallas. Mexico City. Bogota. Lima. Santiago. Buenos Aires.

Tomás looked up.

"The old Greek and Russian immigration?"

Mateo smiled.

"That's what I thought at first.

He slowly denied.

"But not anymore.

He paused again.

"Most of those who arrive now were not born Orthodox.

Tomás raised an eyebrow.

"Locals?"

—More and more.

The finger continued to advance on the map.

Many come from Protestantism.

Another brand.

Others from Roman Catholicism.

Another one.

"And others simply began to search for a faith that would preserve the sense of mystery.

Thomas remained looking at the map.

—It seems like a search for the roots.

Exactly.

Mateo smiled.

When an institution loses credibility, people do not always abandon God. Many times he simply re-asks the question from somewhere else.

Thomas slowly picked up his cup.

Secularization promised to fill that void.

"But he couldn't do it.

Mateo rested both hands on the table.

In the north there is a deep weariness of Protestantism turned into a spectacle. In Latin America, disappointment is growing with a Roman Church weakened by its scandals and by a constant adaptation to the modern world. Many believers seek just the opposite.

"The permanent."

"Yes.

Mateo smiled.

"Incense." The liturgy. The Fathers of the Church. Historical continuity. The feeling of entering a place where time still retains memory.

Thomas nodded slowly.

"They're not looking for something new.

"They're looking for something old that's still alive.

Silence returned for a few seconds.

Then Matthew pointed to the map again.

But the most important change is not geographical.

Thomas watched him.

—It's cultural.

Thomas waited.

For a long time, Orthodoxy was seen as a foreign religion. Today the Divine Liturgy is celebrated in Spanish, English and Portuguese. There are priests born here. Entire families who never had Greek, Russian or Arab roots.

He smiled.

"We are not importing a culture. We are proclaiming the same faith with the language of our own people.

Tomás let out a sincere smile.

That does represent a real change.

—And also an enormous responsibility.

The former priest rested his elbows on the table.

"No growth is free of dangers. Which ones do you see?

Matthew held up two fingers.

—Two major risks.

One came down.

—Jurisdictional fragmentation.

Tomás nodded.

"Too many bishops for the same city.

Exactly. Greeks. Russians. Antioquians. Serbs. Each one depends on a different synod. For those who arrive from outside, this reality can be disconcerting.

He lowered his second finger.

"And the other danger is the excessive zeal of the convert.

Thomas smiled understandingly.

—Rigorism.

"Yes.

Mateo sighed.

There is a risk of becoming so obsessed with canons and external forms that mercy is forgotten. If Orthodoxy in the Americas ends up

becoming a club of purists dedicated to condemning the rest of the world, it will repeat the exact same mistake that many of us have tried to escape.

Thomas slowly rested his hand on the table.

Clericalism and pride change their clothes, but they retain the same poison.

Mateo smiled.

"That is why the altar should never exist to judge.

Tomás completed the sentence.

"But to heal."

Both remained silent for a few seconds.

Then Mateo spoke again with a different serenity.

"There's something else I don't want to get lost in all this conversation.

Tomás looked up.

"Orthodoxy will not survive if it ends up negotiating what it received.

Silence filled the room again.

What attracts so many people today is not a more comfortable religion. It is precisely to find a tradition that does not feel the need to reinvent itself in each generation.

Thomas remained listening.

"We offer no news," Matthew continued. We offer continuity. The Parents themselves. The same Liturgy. The same Mysteries. The same faith received from the Apostles. If one day we stop guarding that deposit, we will no longer have anything else to offer.

The conversation ended without any major conclusions.

When Tomás left the apartment, night had covered the city.

As he walked in the crisp autumn air, he understood that faith was not disappearing. Nor was he returning to the past.

I was just looking for a place where time wouldn't have managed to erase it.

Chapter 5: The Hands Over the Head and the White Dress

The small chapel lacked the majesty of the old marble cathedral. Yet in the air thick with myrrh incense breathed something that Thomas had not felt in years: the overwhelming presence of the sacred, stripped of all artifice.

It was a bright spring morning. In front of the iconostasis, covered by the holy icons of Christ, the Theotokos and the saints, Matthew stood in a white robe and bowed head. At his side, his wife Elena accompanied the moment in silence, sustained by the warm gaze of the small community that filled the temple.

Tomás watched from the background, leaning on a wooden column and dressed in a simple gray shirt. To see Matthew there, about to be ordained a deacon of True Orthodoxy, aroused in him an emotion that is difficult to name. It wasn't nostalgia. Much less envy. It was a serene consolation. The invisible thread that he thought was broken in the old structure had never been

cut; it had simply begun to be woven on another loom.

The bishop, an old man with a snowy beard and extraordinarily serene eyes, slowly raised his hands as he pronounced the ancient ordination prayers, invoking the grace of the Holy Spirit upon the candidate.

When he placed the *orarion* on Matthew's shoulders, his voice resounded firmly throughout the chapel.

"Axios!"

The chorus responded immediately.

"Axios!"

And, as one body, the whole assembly repeated loudly:

"Axios! Axios! Axios!"

The wooden walls seemed to echo that word that crossed the centuries.

It is worthy.

Tomás felt a lump in his throat. For years I had witnessed ceremonies that were impeccable from the liturgical point of view, but empty of life.

On the other hand, celebrated in a humble temple and without any pomp, it seemed to him immensely larger.

Not because it was perfect.

But because it was true.

After the Divine Liturgy, the faithful began to gather in the courtyard to share the bread, coffee, and food that each family had brought. There were no monumental parish halls or long protocol tables. Just wooden benches, kids running through the trees, and simple conversations.

Mateo looked for Tomás with his eyes.

Finding himself in the court, the new deacon walked directly toward him.

"Thank you for coming."

His voice still retained the contained emotion of the ceremony.

Thomas took her hands affectionately.

"I wouldn't have missed it for anything in the world.

He kept a few seconds of silence.

"Today I have seen something descend upon you that in too many places ended up becoming a simple administrative procedure.

He stared at him.

"Protect him." Don't let habit dull the wonder.

Mateo nodded.

"I'll try."

He looked at the small community that was talking a few meters away.

"It won't be easy. We are few. The resources are barely enough. There are no large budgets or structures capable of sustaining us. From Monday to Friday I will continue to practice as an architect. I will serve at the altar when my work allows me.

He smiled.

"But it is precisely there that I discover a freedom that I had never imagined. Nothing compels me to remain here except love for Christ and for his Church.

Thomas immediately understood the weight of those words.

For too many years I had seen how the ministry ended up depending on offices, regulations and political balances. Here, on the other hand, the service seemed to rest again on the shoulders of ordinary men.

"Your real challenge begins today," he said calmly. Keep intact fidelity to the Holy Canons and apostolic teaching, but never allow orthodoxy to be transformed into harshness.

Mateo listened attentively.

"The world is full of wounded men. If you ever forget that, you will stop looking like Christ. Don't seek to beat the world. Seek to heal him.

The new deacon smiled humbly.

"Pray for me.

"I will.

They hugged each other for a long time.

That afternoon, as he walked back to his apartment, Tomás understood for the first time the meaning of everything he had experienced.

His time in the old cathedral had not been a failure.

Nor did his resignation.

It had been a bridge.

He had had to go through the ruin of a structure to discover that faith does not belong to institutions, but to Christ; and that no human decadence can extinguish that which the Holy Spirit continues to make flourish in hearts ready to receive it.

The bells of the small chapel began to ring behind him.

Tomás did not look back.

It was not necessary.

He knew that the Kingdom of God continued its silent march, as it had always done: without noise, without power, without the need to impose itself.

And he understood, at last, that truth never needs to conquer the world.

She just needs to remain faithful so that, sooner or later, the world will come back to look for her.

Chapter 6: The Sanctuary of the Everyday

Healing was not a sudden event or a flash of lightning that tore through the darkness. It was a silent process, similar to the way dust ends up settling in a room when, after a long time, someone decides to open the windows.

During the first months after leaving the cassock, Tomás lived with an emptiness that bordered on vertigo. For fifteen years the liturgical calendar had ordered every day, from Matins to Vespers. Suddenly, time ceased to be divided into feasts and fasts to merge with the simple rhythm of ordinary men.

And, against all odds, that simplicity began to heal something inside him.

His work as an archivist and restorer of ancient documents required a different patience from that of the parish ministry. To restore a manuscript was to accept that nothing could be rushed. The paper had its own time to dry. The ink needed to slowly reset. Any hasty intervention

ended up destroying what was intended to be saved.

One winter afternoon a girl arrived at the archive with a cardboard box in her arms. His breathing was short, and his eyes still retained the fresh glow of weeping.

"They told me you can save them.

He placed the box on the table.

Inside were dozens of letters moistened by a water leak.

"They are the only letters my grandmother left me. If they disappear... I feel that she disappears with them.

Tom carefully opened the box.

He took the first leaf with the same delicacy with which, years before, he had held a relic.

He smiled.

"They still have hope.

The young woman took her first breath calmly.

"Really?"

—The paper is stronger than it seems. It just takes time... and patience.

For the next few hours they both worked in silence. As they carefully separated each sheet using blotting paper and small tweezers, the girl began to speak.

He spoke of the death of his grandmother.

Of the city that was still strange to him.

Of loneliness.

Of fear.

Thomas did not quote verses.

He did not offer ready-made answers.

He did not try to explain the suffering.

He just listened.

And he understood that, many times, the most profound way to accompany a person is to remain close to him or her without immediately trying to fill all the silences.

When the work was finished, the young woman held the first stabilized letters.

His hands were still shaking.

"Thank you..."

He paused.

"I feel like I can breathe again."

When the door closed again, Thomas remained alone in the workshop.

He looked at his hands stained with dust, ink, and moisture.

Then he understood something he had never understood while wearing his cassock.

His vocation had never depended on an institution.

Not even a garment.

Not even an altar.

What God had placed in him was still intact: the ability to receive the pain of others without appropriating it; to restore what seemed lost; to become, if only for an instant, a bridge to hope.

Soon after, he began volunteering at a homeless overnight shelter.

There were no pulpits there.

There were no liturgical vestments.

Nor great theological debates.

There was hot soup.

Blankets.

Wounds.

Tired looks.

And a naked humanity that no longer needed speeches, but presence.

Thomas found that, while serving a plate of food or sharing a cup of coffee, he found a peace he had never experienced in the endless corridors of the curia.

One night, Matthew appeared in the shelter after finishing the Divine Liturgy.

He found Thomas laughing with an old man as he refilled his cup.

He waited a few minutes before approaching.

—You look different.

Tomás looked up.

He smiled.

"I'm at peace.

Mateo observed the dining room full of simple conversations.

"You've found your place.

Tomás slowly denied.

"No.

He looked around.

"I have discovered that I have never lost it.

He kept a few seconds of silence.

For years I believed that serving God consisted of sustaining an institution. Today I understand that the true temple also stands here.

He pointed to the tables.

"Among those who are hungry."

Then he looked at Matthew.

"You guard the altar and Tradition." I accompany those who arrive with their souls in pieces. They are different paths, but both lead to the same Christ.

Mateo smiled.

Nothing else needed to be added.

As he left the shelter, Tomás looked up at the night sky.

The lights of the city barely showed a few stars.

He thought of the huge cathedral where he had spent so many years.

He thought of the small Orthodox chapel.

He thought of that humble dining room.

And he understood that God had never been shut up in any of those places.

Temples were necessary.

The Liturgy was necessary.

Tradition was necessary.

But all this existed to lead man to a living encounter with Christ, not to replace him.

As he walked home, he felt that the question that had accompanied his entire journey finally found an answer.

Faith had not been lost.

He had only stopped seeking refuge in human certainties to return to dwell, silently, where he had always begun: in a heart willing to love.

Final Chapter: Bread and Icons

Five years later, autumn once again dyed the city's trees gold.

Tomás lived in a small house with a garden, on the outskirts. He divided his days between the historical archive and a modest workshop where he restored manuscripts, photographs and old wood carvings. His favorite spot was the porch table: an old oak board he'd sanded himself where the afternoon sun lingered for a few minutes before hiding.

He heard a car engine pull up in front of the driveway. Soon after, the garden gate opened and Matthew appeared.

Time had silvered a few strands of her hair, but it had not extinguished the serenity of her gaze. He wore the black riasa of the Orthodox priests and walked with the calm of someone who has learned that true authority never needs to be exhibited. After years of service as a deacon, he had been ordained a priest and ministered to a community that grew quietly year after year.

There were no ceremonious greetings.

They embraced like two men who had traveled the same desert together.

Matthew left on the table a blessed bread (*artos*), wrapped in a white cloth, and a small hand-painted icon of the Holy Trinity. Thomas responded by bringing a jug of red wine and two thick glass glasses.

"Elena and the children stayed in the parish preparing the patron saint's feast," Mateo said as he poured the wine. Today there was another lack of seats. Three new families arrived.

Thomas smiled.

"Are they still coming?"

"More than we imagined. Some come from Protestantism; others, of Roman Catholicism. They are not looking for a different religion. They seek a faith that does not change with each generation.

Tomás took the icon in his hands. The painting was simple, without unnecessary embellishments, but it conveyed a peace that was difficult to explain.

"You have built a real refuge, Matthew.

The priest slowly shook his head.

"I didn't build it. I just tried not to put out the fire that others received long before us.

They kept a few seconds of silence.

"It hasn't been easy," Matthew continued. Sustaining a small community requires sacrifices. There are days when tiredness weighs more than joy. But when I see a person go in lost and discover the meaning of prayer again... I remember why I accepted this cross.

Tomás filled the glasses again.

"And you?" Matthew asked. Did you find what you were looking for when you left the cathedral?

Tomás was slow to respond.

He looked at his hands.

In the morning they had restored a manuscript from the nineteenth century; The night before, hot soup had been served in the soup kitchen. They were the same hands that for years had raised the chalice on a stone altar.

He smiled with a serenity unknown to the man he had been five years ago.

"I found the truth without disguises. For a long time I believed that my vocation depended on an institution. Today I know that it depended solely on how faithfully I loved others. You were called to guard the altar and the apostolic teaching. I was called to discover that the altar can also be erected at a table, in a workshop or next to a person who needs to be heard.

Mateo nodded slowly.

There was no disagreement between them.

Just two different paths born from the same search.

He took the *artos*, broke it carefully, and offered half of it to Thomas.

—Two vocations.

Thomas received the bread with a smile.

"The same truth.

They ate in silence as the sun disappeared behind the hills.

The first lights of the city began to light up one after another, like small lamps defying the arrival of night.

For a long time none of them spoke.

It was no longer necessary.

Both had understood, after so many years, that the true loss of faith had never consisted in the closure of churches or the decrease in the number of faithful, but in forgetting that God can never be a prisoner of an institution.

And that every community, no matter how holy it considers itself, only remains alive as long as it retains enough humility to let the truth judge it before pretending to judge the world.

On the table were the broken bread, the shared wine and the small icon illuminated by the last light of the day.

It was little.

And yet, for both of them, it was enough.