

ANNUAL MEETINGS OF COUNCIL GENERAL

Oporto (Portugal), 13 June 2019

TITLE OF THE LECTURE

I feel very pleased and honoured to have been invited to take part in this important annual meeting of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, to share with all of you some reflections on “The Role of the Laity in the Church of Pope Francis”. My special thanks go to President Renato Lima de Oliveira and his colleagues, for the invitation which I accepted with great pleasure.

I notice in the title of the lecture suggested to me, two aspects which are inseparable in the vocation, tradition and mission of your Society. On the one hand, it asks me to speak about “laity”, and I know very well how the lay state is an essential, appropriate and characteristic feature of your experience as an organisation. This goes back to the fundamental origins of your charism, in the time of Antoine Frédéric Ozanam and his friends. Ozanam is a great lay saint, for yesterday, today and tomorrow. As I read in one of your texts, he was an “outstanding prophet, since over 170 years ago, it was inconceivable to be talking about a lay organisation undertaking ecclesial action”. Your originating experience was truly surprising in a Church characterised by strong clericalism, at a time of a siege mentality in the face of an aggressively secularising culture. Ozanam, his friends and successors both anticipated and nourished the rediscovery of lay action, which converged in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. This characteristic of yours has had to be protected and defended throughout your history, up to our own times, to avoid abusive, distorting ecclesiastical takeovers.

The second reference in the conference title is “...in the Church of Pope Francis”. And it means what it says, although it might be preferable to say: during the pontificate of Pope Francis, because it’s not the Church of Pope Francis, but only that of Jesus Christ. What the second part of the title clearly means is the other aspect of your history: the lay state has never been placed in opposition to ecclesiality, to full membership of the Church, to active participation in the communion and mission of the Church. Hence all the blessings and encouragement received by the SSVP over the decades of successive pontificates and episcopacies. However, it is very important that they make explicit reference to Pope Francis here, because he is the Successor of Peter, Vicar of Christ, Bishop of Rome and Universal Shepherd, whom God wanted for this moment of the Church and of all humanity, and because we manifest to him all our affective and effective communion.

CHRISTIFIDELES LAICI

You surely remember the last great Church document referring particularly to the laity. I mean the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, “Christifideles laici” It was a Magna Carta for the Catholic laity at the end of the millennium, but it continues to have power and relevance today.



Now it is interesting to note that in his 6-year pontificate, Pope Francis has spoken relatively little about the laity, as an explicit topic, although he does obviously include them in all his homilies, catechesis and messages referring to all Christians, to all the “Holy faithful people of God”. It goes without saying that the Pope uses the term “laity” only in a measured way, and when necessary, as he prefers that former term, used since the early Church until the present day, which is of much greater significance. Speaking of “lay people” is to speak above all of the baptised, and to evoke the “Holy faithful people of God”. This is what the Pope is saying in his very direct way, when he points out - in his letter to Cardinal Marc Ouellet, on 20 March 2016 - that “we all enter the Church as lay people. The first sacrament, which forever seals our identity, and of which we should always be very proud, is that of baptism. Through this, and through anointing of the Holy Spirit, [the faithful] are consecrated as a spiritual house and holy priesthood (see L.G. 10). Our first and fundamental consecration”, Pope Francis reminds us, “has its roots in baptism. No-one was baptised a priest or Bishop. We are baptised lay people, and it is the indelible sign which nothing and no-one can remove”.

For this reason, the post-synodal apostolic exhortation, after the Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops met in October 1987 to address the mission of the laity in the Church and society, is entitled “Christifideles laici”. It is not just “laity” now, but above all “christifideles” [faithful of Christ]. This is not simply a question of terminology, but it is replete with profound theological and pastoral implications. This noun, “christifideles”, “of/in Christ”, expresses the essential and distinctive sign of the ecclesial existence of the baptised, of the Christian, prior to, more radical, original and decisive with respect to, any later distinction between states of life, ministries, charisms and functions. Being in Christ, or living the path of Christ as disciples and missionaries - as the document from the 5th General Conference of Latin American bishops in Aparecida would say - belongs in itself and through itself, to all the baptised: lay, religious and pastors.

There are fundamental sections of this post-synodal, pontifical exhortation, which harmonise deeply with the proposals of Pope Francis in this letter: “Incorporation into Christ through faith and Baptism is the source of being a Christian in the mystery of the Church. This mystery constitutes the Christian's most basic ‘features’ and serves as the basis for all the vocations and dynamism of the Christian life of the lay faithful” (n.9). So, “it is no exaggeration to say that the entire existence of the lay faithful has as its purpose to lead a person to a knowledge of the radical newness of the Christian life that comes from Baptism, the sacrament of faith, so that this knowledge can help that person live the responsibilities which arise from that vocation received from God” (n. 10).

A good teacher, Fr Luigi Giussini, wished to affirm this, ending with the exclamation: “Lay person, in other words, Christian”. And the same applies to the famous statement by Saint Augustine, then Bishop of Hippo, in his Sermon 340, when he asserted: “For you, I am a bishop, with you, I am a Christian. The first is an office accepted; the second is a gift received. One is danger; the other is safety”.

THE HOLY PEOPLE OF GOD

“Lay people are part of the faithful Holy People of God and thus are the protagonists of the Church and of the world”, ends the letter from the Holy Father to Cardinal Ouellet. Speaking of lay people immediately evokes the “Holy People of God”; that is “to evoke the horizon to which we are called

to look and reflect”. It is impressive how many times the Pope explicitly refers, as if with reverence, esteem and tenderness, to the “Holy People of God”, emphasising their greatness and beauty. “When we uproot (the laity) from the faithful Holy People of God, we uproot them from their baptismal identity and thus we deprive them of the grace of the Holy Spirit”.

Without doubt, Pope Francis is taking back, rescuing and redefining the reality of the “People of God”, according to the teachings of the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican. I say ‘rescuing’, not because it was denied, but because during the post-conciliar period it rather fell into disuse as a way of preventing and avoiding merely sociological lectures on its reality. And yet, in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, produced during the work of Vatican II, the fact of placing the chapter on the people of God ahead of those referring to the hierarchy, the laity and the religious, was considered by many commentators, in somewhat high-flown rhetoric, as a “Copernican revolution”. It meant, in truth, the replacement of the pyramid image of the Church with the hierarchy at the top, from where everything proceeded, and the faithful at the bottom, simply receiving and following orders, or at best carrying out hierarchical plans (although still today there are persistent clerical habits which reduce the laity to servants of priests, their “errand-boys”, shutting them up in “sacristies”, to use self-referential ecclesial language).

The Holy Father’s letter thus broaches some fundamental teachings of “Lumen Gentium”: “So there is only one people of God, chosen by Him: only one Lord, one faith, one baptism (Eph. 4, 5); sharing a common dignity as members from their regeneration in Christ, having the same filial grace and the same vocation to perfection; possessing in common one salvation, one hope and one undivided charity” (n.32). The common and equal dignity and shared responsibility of all the baptised in the Holy People of God: its identity “the dignity and freedom of the children of God, in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells as in His temple” - says the letter, quoting “Lumen Gentium”, n. 9. In “reflecting, thinking, evaluating, discerning, we have to be more attentive still” - writes the Pope in his letter to Cardinal Ouellet - to the fact that this People “is anointed with the grace of the Holy Spirit (...). Clericalism also tends to diminish and undervalue the baptismal grace that the Holy Spirit has placed in the heart of our people”. It is a form of degeneracy which is still very much alive, as demonstrated by the many sad abuses of power, which often lead to crimes of sexual abuse.

EXPERIENCES OF VATICAN II ECCLESIOLOGY

Way back, on 18th April 1967, Pope Paul VI stated that “the Council ratified and expanded the contribution offered by lay Catholic movements, for more than a century, to the pilgrim and militant church”. In the same vein, St John Paul II, addressing national lay organisations, on his first apostolic journey to Mexico (January 1979), said: “You know very well how the Second Vatican Council took up this great contemporary historical movement of the ‘advancement of the laity’, studying it in its theological foundations, integrating it and illuminating it completely in the ecclesiology of ‘Lumen Gentium’, convoking and giving impetus to the active participation of laity in the life and mission of the Church.” We know that this current of history - one of the most significant and relevant features of the Church’s 20th century - was generated and driven forward by successive forces in its process of maturing and knowledge of itself and of the mission of the Church in our time, coming together and receiving expression in the Second Vatican Council. Celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the promulgation of the council decree “Apostolicam

Actuositatem” (18.XI/1985), the first document of a Council entirely dedicated to the laity, Saint John Paul II offered an illuminating summary of its teachings. He emphasised “the full recognition of the dignity and responsibility of the laity, as christifideles, incorporated in Christ, or rather as living members of his Body, participants in this communion mystery, by virtue of the sacraments of baptism and confirmation, and the consequent common, universal priesthood of all Christians (...), called to live, bear witness and share in the power of Christ's redemption - the key to and fullness of meaning for human existence - in the heart of every ecclesial community and in all areas of our shared life (...)”. After that, taking up these teachings again, came the post-synodal apostolic exhortation “Christifideles laici”, as the Magna Carta. The letter from Pope Francis to Cardinal Ouellet, continues these reflections, with some nuances and stresses characteristic of his papacy.

Pope Francis's views on the dignity and responsibility of all the baptised within the idea of the Holy People of God overcome certain reductive interpretations of the so-called “theologies of the laity”, which, in the immediate post-conciliar stage, tended to base the “specifics” of the laity, in opposition and in contrast to that of the priest and the religious. Highlighting the value of difference and diversity, of distinctiveness, the idea was to emphasise the “lay identity”, distinguishing a “lay spirituality”, “lay formation” and “lay commitment”, the “autonomy of the laity”, praising the laity. “The hour of the laity” - a concept very much in vogue at the time, which the Pope repeats with a good dose of irony - recognised the invasion of the ecclesial stage by emerging, enthusiastic lay groups. This was defined as, and seen as arising from a spirit of critical resistance, a sensitive area, creating openings, and driven by a need for profound renewal in a Church considered as “clerical” and “pyramidal”. This particular identity, defined by opposition, obscured the common baptismal foundation, and fractured the mystery of ecclesial communion, often presented in fact as that of the various bodies in the Church - clerical, religious and lay - in tension and struggling for jealous protection of their own spheres of action, for affirmation and reallocation of their respective rights, powers and functions. It is no surprise that relations between the clergy and these emerging lay minority groups would be an area of tension, especially in parish life. This was the source of the occasional contrasts drawn between “People's Church” and “Hierarchy's Church”, between “Community Church” and “Sacramental Church”, between “Charismatic Church” and “Institutional Church”.

Are there not still some residual mindsets, which reduce “promotion of the laity” to an obsessive “claiming of rights”, as if this “promotion” - a noun in itself illustrative - should be focused on an industrious search for more space, power and roles within ecclesiastical structures? Still today, in Anglo-Saxon environments, people often speak of “empowerment” of the laity, not so much referring to the power of the Holy Spirit in the life of the laity, as to ecclesiastical power in a worldly sense.

This trend combines with the fact that, as regards “the hour of the laity” and “the promotion of the laity”, references to lay people diminished, and instead the focus was on emergent lay minority groups, those most informed and aware of council happenings, where expressions of enthusiasm and euphoria, opposition and conflict, experiments and investigations, criticisms and disputes whirled around during this initial post-conciliar phase. These awful distinctions between “laïcs” and “laïcat” also prevailed in France. They formed the vocabulary of the organised, committed, militant laity, members of Catholic Action and its surrounding movements, in the various ecclesiastical

bodies and in their social and political commitments. The “laïcs” remained in the shadows. In many other Churches the “militant lay people” were considered distinct from the simple “practising lay people”, and those of the “unorganised” and the “passive body of the faithful”.

It is clear that Pope Francis strongly objects to the fact that any reference to lay people has to be accompanied by a complacent qualifier, proper to the illuminated minorities, as when people speak of “committed laity”, “militant laity”, “grown-up laity”, etc. How should he classify his grandmother Rosa, to whose memory he often refers as the fundamental link through which Catholic tradition was made flesh in his life? The happy memory of the “simple faith” should not be lost, bearing witness in the family, the parish community, schools and colleges and other communities, “coming into our lives and being made flesh”. Pope Francis does not speak of the “little flock”, or of the “few and the good”, the “hardliners”, the “steady”, “committed” and “militant” - often in a neo-Pharisaical sense - but to a people chosen and called, invited and gathered by God, formed of poor sinners, converted through the grace of the Holy Spirit into living members of the Body of Christ. And as all people, living the many different ways of belonging and membership, participation and shared responsibility, but all called to grow in whatever forms their life and mission.

Because of such reductive elitism, most of the Holy People of God remained in the shadows, and their traditional and deeply-rooted ways of Catholic participation and worship were scorned, as the remains of a decomposed Christianity. The true lay people appeared only to be those who combined presence, functions and activism in the ecclesiastical structures, or undertook political militancy, while the very many and varied lived realities of faith and charity, in ordinary daily life and in the deeply-rooted forms of popular piety, were almost never considered.

So Pope Francis greatly values the theological and pastoral turn taken by Saint Paul VI, when he reappraised “popular piety” in the extraordinary Apostolic Exhortation “*Evangelii Nuntiandi*” in 1975. Pope Francis frequently quotes admiringly from “*Evangelii Nuntiandi*”, and recalls the chapter on “popular religiosity” (n. 48), as his favourite, in the final document of the 5th General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Aparecida (May 2007).

For Pope Francis, following these footsteps is a matter of “the faith of the people”, the means of inculturation of Catholic tradition in the history and life of the people, particularly the poor and simple. It is manifested in its religious expressions, but also, with the inevitable load of ambiguity, in the most varied aspects of life. He discussed it especially in the Apostolic Exhortation “*Evangelii Gaudium*”, repeating these significant expressions in the letter to Cardinal Ouellet: “an evangelized popular culture contains values of faith and solidarity capable of encouraging the development of a more just and believing society, and possesses wisdom of the people which ought to be gratefully acknowledged”. The Holy Father concludes, in his letter to Cardinal Ouellet, “Pope Paul VI used an expression that I consider fundamental, the faith of our people, their guidelines, research, aspirations, yearning. When they succeed in listening and orienting themselves, they manifest for us a genuine presence of the Spirit”. For this, he encourages us to “trust in our People, in their memory and in their ‘sense of smell’, let us trust that the Holy Spirit acts in and with our People and that this Spirit is not merely the “property” of the ecclesial hierarchy”.

A RENEWED ENCOUNTER AND CONVERSION

From the start of his pontificate, Pope Francis, moved by the grace of the Spirit, has searched for all possible means, from his pastoral experience and personal temperament, to reach the heart of those he meets, to guard and stir the holy people entrusted to him, to bring out disturbing questions and longings for good, love, truth and justice in the human adventure, to proclaim the Gospel. His “evangelical revolution” involves and requires a dynamic of conversion. Above all, it is a personal conversion, for a renewed encounter with Jesus Christ. At the beginning of his Exhortation, “*Evangelii Gaudium*”, he says this when he “invites all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day (n.3).” It is an urgent, essential and central invitation, in which all of the words, initiatives and actions of the pontificate are concentrated. To the Bishops in Italy, he begins by asking: “Who is Jesus Christ for me? How has he marked the truth of my story? What does my life say about him?”. If we do not respond to this invitation, we are being satisfied only with the fireworks and anecdotes of this pontificate. We are paying little attention to what the Spirit is saying in the Church and to the Churches, to each one of the baptised, through the witness, magisterium and ministry of Pope Francis. Nothing can be assumed or taken for granted in the faith of Christians; without this ever-renewed encounter with the Lord, which happens as a consequence of familiarity and communion, commitment to Christian tradition and values, it runs the risk of slipping into an old or new style ecclesiastical clericalism, as if we just belong to an organisation with religious and social aims.

With reference to Christians, Pope Francis particularly wants to destabilise the tendency to profess a formal Christianity, the traditional bundle, committed solely to a few rites, doctrines and precepts. There is thus no lack of references to “window-shopping”, “pastry shop”, “rosewater” Christians, those who live as pagans, who are “onlookers”, to Christians who are defeated, sceptical, depressed, sad, because they have lost hope (see E.G. 76-86). The Pope no doubt wants to disturb and destabilise us from any tendency to assimilate and conform our Christianity to the spirit of this world, ideologically contaminated. Stronger still is his suggestion that we should be obedient to the Spirit of God, welcoming his surprises, and the Pope is certainly the first to welcome them, taking us out of our material, spiritual and ecclesiastical security. It is the Spirit of God who leads us to the encounter with Jesus Christ, with the same reality, the same novelty, actuality, the same power of persuasion and effect, as that addressed to Andrew and Philip on the banks of Lake Tiberias (“Master, where do you live?... Come, follow me”), to the Samaritan woman and the well, thirsty for living water, to Zacchaeus up the tree, visited by the Lord in his house, to Mary Magdalen moved by his merciful presence, to the disciples at Emmaus who felt their hearts burn within them when they recognised him. It is a true encounter with Christ, changing our hearts despite all our resistance and our stumbles. It changes my relationships with my wife and children, with my work, with how I use my free time and my money, it changes every dimension of my existence, and making them more human, filling them with greater pleasure, love, happiness and hope. In this way the supreme commandment of charity is converted into the determining frame for our whole existence, the true and fruitful expression of our faith, the seal of our Christian identity.

What is conversion but “the gift of recognising oneself as a sinner”, and of humbly trusting oneself to God’s grace, to have Christ present within the canvas of our life, illuminating it, changing it despite our distractions, resistance and stumbles, helping it grow in humanity, love and trust, in happiness and hope? The Pope invites us to free ourselves from our idols, through God’s grace, to regain the freedom of the children of God. He invites us to grow always as his missionary disciples, witnesses of a new, surprising life, according to the Gospel.

THE ENCOUNTER WITH THE POOR

Pope Francis always reminds us that this encounter with Christ certainly takes place in the Eucharist, in listening to his Word, in the communion of the faithful, in a personal practice of prayer, but it is an encounter which cannot remain separate from another essential encounter which we make with the poor. For us Christians, poverty, as the Holy Father stated on 18 May 2013, “is not a sociological, philosophical or cultural category: no, it is a theological category: I would say it is perhaps the first category, because this God, the Son of God, has humbled himself, has made himself poor to walk with us (...). And this is our poverty: the poverty of the flesh of Christ (...). A poor Church for the poor starts by going to the flesh of Christ”. The poor are “the second Eucharist of the Lord”, said one of the Church Fathers. Not in vain does Pope Francis summarise the entire Christian message in two basic protocols for our missionary discipleship, for our witness and salvation: one is that of the Beatitudes, the other is that from Matthew’s gospel where we read: “(...) Lord, when did we see you hungry and gave you food? Or when did we see you thirsty and gave you a drink? When did we see you a stranger and take you in, naked and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison, and come to visit you? (...) I promise you, everything you did for one of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did it for me” (Mt. 25, 31-43). The preferential love for the poor is not an “option”, it is an evangelical requirement inherent in all those who profess themselves Christian. So said Saint Pope Paul VI, in his speech at the opening of the 2nd session of the Second Vatican Council, 29 September 1963: Our Mother Church looks “especially at the suffering, weeping part of humanity, because she knows that these people belong to her by their evangelical right”. She cannot turn her back on them.

Successive popes have always emphasised this preferential love for the poor and suffering. The present Pope, in his words and actions, in everyday dramas, invites us to go to meet the poor, in a very practical way, face to face, touching their wounds, full of compassion, tenderness and charity. These are the faces of the new slaves of our time, like the boys and girls subjected to all kinds of sexual abuse, exploited at work while still very young, or drawn into networks of begging, and used as drug couriers; women enslaved by prostitution or who suffer domestic violence every day; those treated as servants of their masters; immigrants who are targets for unscrupulous traffickers, and who have to accept appalling living and working conditions; those who are brutally exploited in “informal” sweatshops. There are also those considered as “waste material”, “discards”, “excluded”, such as those discarded by their mothers through the hateful crime of abortion; children abandoned to live in the streets; young people who neither work nor go to school, with no prospects other than joining the networks of crime and drug-dealing; the multitude of the unemployed whose human dignity is eroded (many permanently excluded from the job market), or who suffer extreme

insecurity in work and life, with no-one concerned about them; drug addicts wandering the city streets; refugees who cannot return to the country they came from, living in concentration camps for multitudes of the dispossessed, whom no government will take in; the huge numbers of people living in poverty, including starvation; migrants classified as superfluous in their countries of origin; those who live on rubbish dumps and those who survive by working and feeding on garbage; the elderly, sick and abandoned, on whom “legal” or covert forms of euthanasia are often practised.

These are real people in need, and not statistical chatter about poverty from technocrats, or high-flown rhetoric to fire up minds about an ideological pauperism, nor simple philanthropy which might be good for an NGO, but is far from sufficient for the Church.

Christians cannot ignore the many “Lazaruses” at our gates, in our streets, in our fields and mountains. We cannot turn away, in order not to see them, and shut ourselves up in our privileged indifference.

CHARITY OF WORKS, POLITICAL CHARITY

Inseparable from this face to face charity, Pope Francis adds, is a “charity of works”, to attend in a long-term and more effective way to the needs of the poor. With good reason Pope Francis has again highlighted the importance in the life of the Church of the spiritual and material works of mercy. If at times these are given person to person, many others need this charity to be expressed and provided in works, to which, moreover, the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity, so much a part of the Church’s social teaching, apply.

Finally, there is also a very necessary “political charity”. Since Pope Pius XII, successive pontiffs have talked about politics as the “highest form of charity”, in terms of disinterested service to the common good of nations, and especially the poor. This is “good politics”, unlike the abundant forms of corruption and degeneracy found everywhere. It is not enough to help the poor in their immediate needs, but we also have to have a deeper understanding, discern and confront the causes which continually produce situations of poverty, including destitution, creating extreme, iniquitous conditions of social inequality in communities. It is a tragic contradiction of our times, that the more the opportunities for technological and economic progress increase, the more people there are who cannot access their benefits. The Pope has many times roundly denounced “an economy of exclusion and inequality”, including an economy “which kills” (see E.G. ff), raising a prophetic voice against the idolatry of money and the egoism at its root. Furthermore, the way in which he confronts and tries to resolve the situation of the poor is a judgement and measure of all good (or bad) politics.

CATHOLICS IN PUBLIC LIFE

That is why Pope Francis underlines another requirement, very much for lay people. “Often we have given in to the temptation of thinking that committed lay people are those dedicated to the works of the Church and/or the matters of the parish or the diocese, and we have reflected little on how to accompany baptised people in their public and daily life (...),” he wrote in his letter to Cardinal Ouellet. What has become of the responsibility particular to the laity of “engaging in temporal affairs, and ordering them according to God’s will” (L.G. 31, G.S. 43)? So is the world

not perhaps “the place and the means for the lay faithful to fulfil their Christian vocation”, as a reality intended to obtain the fullness of meaning and life in Christ? (see CHL n.15).

Naturally, this “secular character” is not a description of the task of the lay faithful exclusively. The whole Church lives in the “century” and is a sacrament for the world, but the lay faithful are called to be the vanguard, opening the path to the Gospel on the most varied fronts, to build a just, social order. It is also clear that it is the duty of the ecclesiastical hierarchy to teach and interpret authentically the moral principles which guide the conduct and choices of the faithful in the “polis”, and which enlighten the way they build on them for the common good, and it is the duty of the laity “using their own initiative and taking action in this area—without waiting passively for directives and precepts from others, to infuse a Christian spirit into the mental outlook, customs, laws and structures of the community in which they live (Populorum Progressio, n. 81).

Notwithstanding all this, and just when the waves of secularisation of the clergy were beginning to be overcome, there was an increasing trend towards clericalisation of the laity. In his letter, Pope Francis speaks of a “homologization of the laity; treating them as ‘errand boys’”. Everywhere there is a warning of the disproportion between the necessary and generous availability of very many lay people as liturgy leaders and leaders of Christian communities, as catechists, helping in parishes where priests are scarce; as “pastoral agents” invested with the many diverse “non-ordained ministries”; as members of various organisations, councils and offices within the Church, on the one hand, and on the other the often conformist, anonymous and irrelevant diaspora of Catholic lay people in the world of work and the economy, politics and culture, social media, etc. Some lay people might begin to consider the fact of whether or not they have a consultative or executive vote in one or other ecclesiastical organisation or whether or not they exercise this or that pastoral function, as being more important for their Christian life, for their participation in the Church's mission than are the important decisions they take every day in their family, work, social or political life. At the same time, priests end up treating lay people simply as parish and pastoral co-workers, rather than as means of education, self-development, company and support from the Christian community, for their “secular” presence, seeking to build more human forms of life.

It is of course not a matter of devaluing the very positive and generous shared responsibility from lay people in building Christian communities, but it is very interesting to consider what Pope Benedict 16th said in his opening speech at Aparecida, which was repeated by the Latin American bishops in their final document (edited by the then Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio): there is “a notable absence in the political, communications and university sectors, of voices and initiatives from strong Catholic leaders, devoted to their vocations, that are consistent with their ethical and religious convictions”. Of this ecclesiastical withdrawal of the laity, in “matters of healing”, as Pope Francis says, there are several factors to consider. Vatican Council II was already speaking about the “divorce between ‘faith and life’”, and the Apostolic Exhortation “Christifideles laici”, of “two parallel lives (...): on the one hand, the so-called “spiritual” life (...), and on the other, the so-called “secular” life, that is, life in a family, at work, in social relationships, in the responsibilities of public life and in culture” (n.59). The professed life is often reduced to a list of rites, doctrines, moral precepts and pastoral procedures, without being conceived or experienced as an occasion for a surprising encounter with Christ, who embraces and transforms the entire life of the baptised person.

“What does the fact that lay people are working in public life mean for us pastors?” Pope Francis writes in his letter. “It means finding a way to be able to encourage, accompany and inspire all attempts and efforts that are being made today in order to keep hope and faith alive in a world full of contradictions, especially for the poor, especially with the poorest.” The Pope asks pastors to open doors, work and dream with people, reflect and especially pray with people. Not “contriving” their attendance at the planning stage in pastoral projects, but recognising the people, accompanying and supporting them. It means being aware that, by belonging to the Holy People of God, these lay people experience the movements of the Holy Spirit. It means being attentive to the signs of God’s presence in the “city”, where the ordinary life of people is focused and takes place, present in “citizens, promoting charity, fraternity, the desire for goodness, truth and justice.” Lack of attention is a sign of clericalism.

There is another, very important observation in the Pope’s letter. The Universal Shepherd knows “lay people — through their reality, through their identity, for they are immersed in the heart of social, public and political life, participate in cultural forms that are constantly generated — need new forms of organization and of celebration of the faith (...). This challenges us to imagine innovative spaces and possibilities for prayer and communion which are more attractive and meaningful (...)”, in their various contexts, without running the risk of “giving general directives in order to organize the People of God within its public life”. Seeking these new ways of meeting together, for company and support, is very important to avoid a dispersal which would leave us alone, and which tends to “shape the present time”. For those who take on often absorbing public responsibilities, Sunday attendance in parishes is not enough, they need to be incorporated in various ways in living communities, where they can share their life in the light of faith, feed it and pray it. Being aware of the lack of such presence in public spaces, and the actual situation in which lay people live in cities, without effectively undertaking a search for these new forms of celebration, reflection, prayer and communion, is a sign of the clericalism to which the Holy Father refers, which “limits the diverse initiatives and efforts and, dare I say, the necessary boldness to enable the Good News of the Gospel to be brought to all areas of the social and above all political sphere” (...) quenching the prophetic fire.

Today more than ever, a change of leaders in the public sphere is needed, with originality of presence and contribution from Catholics in the democratic dialectic in pursuit of the common good.

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