

LAY BY ELECTION

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*You did not choose me, no, I chose you; and I
commissioned you to go out and to bear fruit,
fruit that will last (Jn 15, 16).*

The normal thing regarding this article on the laity would be that it would have been written by lay men and women who have lived very good and fruitful processes of election and confirmation of a clearly lay option. But I have decided to express in writing my conviction based on my long experience as Assistant of CLC and as Director of a Spirituality Centre.

My conviction is very clear: when the laity discover their lay vocation in a process of Ignatian election, they become more deeply-rooted and their ecclesial commitment becomes more visible and fruitful, their spirituality more profound and, above all, their lay identity is clearer.

This is what I am going to develop in the following paragraphs.

You did not choose me

I am going to take this phrase from Saint John's Gospel with great liberty, and not in the specific sense in which Jesus wants to express to his disciples, but rather in a broader and more colloquial way; that is, there has been no process of election understood like an option to follow Jesus in the radical way and freedom as presented by the Gospel, for

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example, we could go back to the characteristics of the following of Jesus offered by Luke (*Luke 9, 57-62*).

I do not believe that it is necessary to present an exegesis of this following as given by John or Luke, because what I intend to say is in a different sense: the immense majority of the laity – men and women – in our Church are not lay by option but rather they are lay because they have never considered being something else, many times, they are lay in the Church, without feeling or considering what the lay vocation means.

Even though lately the vocation of the laity has been clarified more, as yet the definition of what it is to be lay and the identity of the lay person in the Church has not as yet been totally defined. Not even Vatican Council II was able to explain this identity, and it does it by negation:

“The term laity is here understood to mean all the faithful except those in holy orders and those in a religious state sanctioned by the Church. These faithful are by Baptism made one body with Christ and are established among the People of God. They are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic and kingly functions of Christ. They carry out their own part in the mission of the whole Christian people with respect to the Church and the world” (LG 31).

Even today, after forty years, the laity are still described more by negation (not ministers nor consecrated) than by their own proper identity and by their vocational presence within the charisms of the Church... and of the still very clerical Church.

It is true that *Christifideles Laici* goes forward to define the mission of the laity in what it calls “secular life” – Would it be by opposition to a “sacred life”? – in the field of family life, of work, of social relationships, of political commitment and of culture. In this case, the different fields of the mission of the committed laity are already pointed out. But I insist the great majority of the laity – men and women – of our Church live their lay reality, as Paul VI said: “as not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived”.

I was the one who chose you

In this case I do give this title the specific evangelical sense given by Jesus: the initiative of the election clearly comes from Jesus, he called those whom he wanted, we can say that it is an “election of predilection”, because he first loved his disciples and because of this he chose them.

When I refer to the Ignatian election I do it in two different senses: in the first place, just as the *Diccionario de Espiritualidad Ignaciana* (Dictionary of Ignatian Spirituality, Mensajero - Sal Terrae, 2007) defines it in the word ELECTION:

The privileged and decisive moment to discover the divine will takes place exactly in the process of the Exercises, which begins on the fifth day of the Second Week of the Exercises, at the same time that the one doing the Exercises is contemplating the mysteries of the public life of Jesus Christ having the intention to conform his life to His in poverty and in humility, not seeking anything else than the divine will.

Of course, in this sense the different phases of the process and the times of election which Ignatius points out at length and in detail in the book of the Exercises, including the confirmation, can help. A vocational election can be reached not necessarily in a process of the Spiritual Exercises but in the search for God's will which includes some trait or characteristic which the Dictionary manifests when explaining this term:

“a specific and clear authentic search of God's will, opening oneself to the presence of the Spirit so as to be guided by what He inspires us, a Biblical tradition which makes us feel that the Lord guides and accompanies his people on the journey, the certainty of faith with the assurance that if we are ready to seek God's will with an honest and upright heart, certainly, God will make us know His will and will help us to fulfil it, in any of the possible ways, which is not up to us to choose, but rather to accept the way that God wants to use with each person”.

Whether in the specific sense of the Spiritual Exercises or in a broader sense of an authentic experience of faith and of a spiritual pilgrimage, the

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laity who have lived this process deeply, have a clearer sense or clearer connotations of their lay vocation.

The first one of these connotations is a more defined lay identity, not by negation nor for lack of having thought about it, but rather because of the significance of a place and of a presence in the Church which are a value in themselves and a clearly qualified word.

On the other hand, the theological concept of “People of God” is strengthened, which Vatican Council II used in the Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, as the first emblematic chapter, that starting from that concept we have the key for reading the whole document. We can say that to be lay, to be people, is a theological locus.

And besides, in order to recover all the consequences of the term “vocation” for the laity, that is, the experience of being called, the search for God’s will through discernment, the emotion to feel oneself called and elected, the subjective resonances of a profoundly affective union with the following of Jesus, passion for a specific mission in the living out of daily life.

Lastly, if the laity are lay by vocation and election in the sense mentioned above, then, there will be a less clerical presence in the Church, if they are given the right to speak which many times is denied to them, (especially if they are lay women), if they are allowed greater visibility in what concerns leadership and responsibility, then and only then, we will go from a concept of a very clerical Church (even though there are also some ‘clerical’ lay persons) to a more evangelical Church and one more according to Vatican Council II: first the People of God and then all the rest.

*to be lay, to be people,
is a theological locus*

To go out and bear fruit

Now I want to speak about the mission when this is by Ignatian election. The specific fields of the mission of the laity have already been pointed out: married life and the presence of children, the fields of different professions and of the world of labour, the citizen’s action, the political

commitment, the world of economics, the broad expressions of culture, etc.

It is true that in some of these fields there is also the presence of religious men and women, and of priests. But it is also true that religious congregations and the priests are not able to be present in all these different fields of society. Who has to evangelize in the world of the family, in the professional world, in the world of politics and of citizenship, in the world of cultural manifestations? Consecrated persons and priests, precisely, because of their life style, can hardly be present in these different worlds and much less for evangelization.

When the laity become passionate for the world in which they live, and live their life, not as opposed to what is sacred, but rather as a place of incarnation and of convincing witness, when they discover that with their professional competence, with the capacity of dialogue between faith and the problems of modern and post-modern culture, when they feel that it is a challenge to find the adequate word of the Good News, when they work profoundly on a dimension which comes from an assumed and expanded spirituality, when they feel that the world in which they live their daily life is the place where the presence of the Gospel should be taken, then, to be a lay person is to build Church there where it is not so evident. Therefore, the laity have a mission territory in the world, and if they cannot reach those spaces which are proper to them, those will remain without evangelization.

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At the beginning we were speaking of the Ignatian election in the Exercises. I only want to add: what is proper to the laity is to make the Exercises in daily life, according to annotation 19 of Ignatius (*EE 19*), that is, *one who is engaged in public affairs*... because the richness of this way is not so much to make the Exercises “during” daily life, but rather “through” daily life. With the structure of the Exercises “to read” and to pray one’s daily life: what takes place in the home, what happens at work, what is experienced in public transport, the news, the newspaper, the encounters and lack of agreement of every day. It is a question of finding God not in transcendent and protected spaces of a house for retreats but rather in the

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prosaic, everyday, but profoundly eloquent spaces of day to day life. And in this context of a routine character, in following Christ, to deepen and carry out the mission in the concrete reality of being lay by election and by the predilection of the Lord.

All this is unsustainable if there is no vocation, if lay persons do not feel elected by Christ for this mission in the fields which are proper to them – even if the separation sacred space/ secular space is debatable - it cannot be sustained if there is no experience of faith, of freedom, of discernment which gives it sustainability.

And a fruit which will last

In the last instance, the religious brothers are lay persons and the religious women are lay persons, they do not form part of a sacramental ministry. But they have a very rich and fruitful missionary action because they have an aim, a programme. Religious congregations have a foundational action, an inspiration and spirituality, one or various charisms, motivating documents, and some facet of the Gospel which they live in a radical way; they have carefully prepared processes of selection and of formation, they are institutionalized, have the sense of belonging, and, also an infrastructure and financial support.

This programme gives them missionary efficacy and a passion which allows them to have the emotion of consecration which fills their life with sense and also the lives of those to whom they witness.

It is true that in the last decades lay movements have increased immensely, and this is a wealth for the Church, but some of them have not as yet succeeded in expressing clearly the richness of the lay vocation, perhaps because of a certain clerical direction, or perhaps also because the lay vocation itself still has unknown, hidden facets and therefore, unfruitful.

For this it would be necessary to recover for our laity, men and women, equivalent programmes, or aims which would give their presence and action in the Church the characteristics of an institution, the sense of belonging and a sustained spirituality, identity and leadership and, above all, lay self esteem. All this is possible, not necessarily in structured movements, but rather in a multitude of forms, according to the cultures of the places where they are present, and according to the discernment which

the ecclesial communities are ready to discern according to the novelty of the Spirit. I am convinced that discernment of the lay vocation and the consequent election will strengthen in the Church the lay presence with great creativity; the hour in which the laity, if we allow them, will make present a greater richness for the Church, still has to arrive

Even though it may seem clearly personal and institutional propaganda, the CLC (Christian Life Community) contains many of those characteristics mentioned above and has, in some way, 450 years of history and of spirituality. Even more, not having CLC a great structure, it only has some General Principles, it allows for a great variety, much creativity, much freedom, a great capacity for adapting to different cultures – we are in more than 60 countries -, much institutionalization and sense of belonging, all this, obviously with its own contradictions, constitutes a good platform for the Ignatian spirituality and mission.

This is the reason why the current definition of the lay person as “the one who is neither a priest nor a religious – man or woman” - expresses great ambiguity and lack of identity. Behind all this, there is the undervaluing of the concept “People of God”. When I was a child and an adolescent, I was always told that “consecrated life was the state of perfection” and even the Jesuits told me this. Strangely, many had forgotten what Ignatius says, precisely when he speaks about the election:

“...that we ought to prepare ourselves to arrive at perfection in whatever state or way of life God, our Lord may grant us to choose” (EE 135).

This, which is a key paragraph for our theme of election has been forgotten by the Church during 450 years. And even more, in the sub-consciousness of many ecclesiastics and many lay persons there are still resonances that to be a lay person is a second category in the Church, because going back to the clerical sub-consciousness, many clerics thank God “ for not being like everyone else” (*Lk 18, 11*).

Some time, the laity could say, with great pride and assumed identity: “I thank God for being the People of God!” Or else: “Christ has chosen me as a lay person and I feel proud of my lay vocation!” We are now just beginning to have a glimpse of the identity of the lay person in the Church, the clarity of which will come only by personal processes to follow Christ in

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discernment, election and in lay passion. In the last instance, Jesus was a lay person and when he said these words which Saint John stresses he said them to lay persons and thinking of the laity.