The identity of the Christian layperson in Salesian style

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What is the point today, at the height of the Church's synodal journey, of speaking of the identity of the Christian laity in a Salesian style?

Before entering into the reflection on the figure of the Christian lay person, on his or her role in the apostolic mission of the Church, on his or her dignity and special character, on what distinguishes “the Salesian style”, it is appropriate to ask ourselves the reasons for choosing this theme for our reflection during the Salesian Family Spirituality Days 2023.

We ask ourselves about this identity first of all because “with humble and joyful gratitude we acknowledge that Don Bosco, by the initiative of God and the maternal mediation of Mary, gave rise in the Church to a singular experience of evangelical life”, which today takes the form of an “apostolic family” made up of institutes of consecrated life, religious and secular, as well as lay apostolic associations. Both the Salesian Family and the wider Salesian Movement are constantly interacting with this word “lay”.

Secondly, precisely because this family has a significant presence of lay members, I believe I can say that we recognise together the need to return not only to the etymological and historical origins, but even more so the theological and ecclesiological origins of the word “lay” and its meaning for us today. Does it still make sense to talk about “lay” today? How much influence, in our understanding of this word, has the use that the world has made of it for some time had when it describes everything that denies the transcendent dimension and the faith, *etsi Deus non daretur*?

Thirdly, today we speak of the lay person “in the Church” to go beyond the questions and challenges of our local, provincial or Salesian Family situations, that is, to understand the specific nature of this word in the wider and universal context of the Church, letting ourselves be enlightened by the Spirit, the Word of God and the Magisterium. The Salesian Family, in fact, lives “at the service of the mission of the Church, especially in the vast world of youth, in working class areas, for the poor and for peoples not yet evangelised.”

Fourthly, I believe that all of us here feel the urgency of a greater contribution of the laity both in the apostolate of evangelisation and in the Christian animation of the so-called “temporal order”, but together we also recognise the need to promote a common vision within the Church and the Salesian Family on the criteria to which this contribution should refer and on the guidelines that it should follow.

Finally, we also recognise that “the ongoing ‘synodal’ experience has reawakened in the lay faithful the idea and desire to be involved in the life of the Church, in her commitment to the contemporary world and in her pastoral action on the ground.” We ask ourselves, therefore: “What can be the specific contribution of the lay Christian in Salesian style to the synodal journey of the Church at this time?”

In the years of the “end of history” and the ideologies of the twentieth century; in the time of “sad passions” and “liquid modernity”, the great existential challenges, together with those of the survival of humanity and creation, revolve around the great theme of identity.

Who am I? This is the great question, which we tend to escape from today or around which, often with extreme suffering, we roam endlessly, with continuous short-term answers. A question that often turns into: “Who am I for you?” To underline the need to see an identity recognised, Pope Francis asks young people, and us as a Salesian Family who are at their service, to rephrase this question: “For whom am I?”

“For whom are we”, lay Christians with Salesian style, in this *kairos* time of “missionary synodality”? We too, as Pope Francis suggests to young people, pointing to the example of Mary, must respond by using a range of languages: the language of the mind, the language of the heart and the language of the hands.

With these reasons, these questions and with this horizon, we aim to 1) understand why the Church speaks to us of “lay” as a vocation, 2) reflect both on the forms and ways of this vocation, as well as on the criteria and guidelines that the Church offers, and finally 3) grasp what it means to live it in a Salesian style and 4) let ourselves be challenged by some ways of working for a synodal future.