

Lay people in the Church: from Vatican II to Pope Benedict XVI, identity and co-responsibility

+ Domenico Sigalini

Being a Church is being the priestly prophetic and regal people of God

Today, in a normal parish, this is what people think: our parish priest has a lot to do; he has to preach, meet people, take care of the children, organise the catechism sessions, look after the needs of elderly people...Poor man! Let us give him a helping hand; otherwise how can he cope? He has to shoulder the responsibility of the whole community and to keep them close to God. How can he do all this by himself? The Bishop has invested so much to make it possible for him to study at the seminary but it was a good investment. This is the only way to guarantee a future for the Church. When priests are no longer there, there will be no church and no one to spread the Gospel! It is the priest's duty to announce the Gospel and lay people, if he convinces them, are there to listen to him and help him. The idea behind this is that the Christian religion concerns only priests. It almost seems that Jesus died for priests and the most lay people could do is to pity them and help them carry out their duties. So now I am going to try to put this in the right prospect.

What does Vatican II say ?

Jesus came into the world to save all human beings. He died, so that every person may rejoice at the fact that he has been saved and makes of his life a masterpiece of goodness, generosity and grace; that young people may undertake the task of changing the world into a reign of justice and peace and that adults may be responsible for the overall good which is life. Jesus was consumed with a passion to see all men saved, to enable them to praise God and to live in communion with Him and with all their fellow men. This is the most beautiful gift to humanity and to each and every believer. So, lay believers say: we are interested in this proposal presented to us by Jesus. It is so good to live the Gospel. We should pass on this proposal to everyone. Jesus said: go into the world and announce the Gospel so let us get together, let us enjoy the Gospel and form families which dedicate themselves to the spreading of His Word. Let us make the Gospel shine in our places of work, study, in business and in all our relations. God wants our sacrifice to be linked with our lives and not with animals' blood. He wants us to give Him our life, our affections, our family life; our work... The Temple is no longer there. This is what the first Christians understood. They stopped going to the Temple to ask the priests to kill a calf and offer it to God. They knew that all God wanted from them was a life lived in communion with him and in solidarity with their brethren. "But what will these people do to live like this when I am no longer with them?" Jesus said to himself. "I will invent" someone who will fill my place, someone who will be their shepherd as I have been, someone who will help them to be docile to the Holy Spirit... I will invent priests. They will definitely not be the old priests of the Temple, who were there just because they were born in a certain tribe, but they will be priests because I have chosen them. They will not make people take their offerings to the Temple but will help all believers to offer their own lives as a gift to God and to their brethren just as a shepherd does for his flock. Therefore priests are there to be of service to lay people and not vice-versa.

In ecclesial terms we say: there is a ministerial priesthood, which is indispensable and important, and a common priesthood, which is, as we say, metaphorical.

We have to see things differently: the true priesthood is the common priesthood, which is the most important and which everyone has. Christ sacrificed himself to "invent", give life and originate the common priesthood.

The common priesthood, which everyone has, including priests and members of religious orders, is a real and existential priesthood, which enables us to offer our own lives to God. The ministerial priesthood, which priests have, is a sacramental priesthood whereby priests mediate between us and God. It is the sign of the necessary mediation but which however is uniquely Christ's prerogative. Without Christ, we cannot meet the Father. Christ is the true mediator between man and God. Through the Sacraments priests only make this mediation visible.

These are two realities which Christ wished to establish. These are closely linked and the more they collaborate, the more the Church, and so the parish, lives in communion and grows. It is not the numerical and qualitative predominance of priests which helps the Church to grow but communion, the fact that we live and work together and the extent to which we are available to one another. So the parish is a community of baptised people, whom the priest helps to live in communion, to carry out their mission and to enjoy the beauty of a Christian way of living. It is adults and young people themselves and not priests who are responsible for the parish to be open and attractive for the youths; it is young people and not priests who should be responsible for formation; it is the faithful and not priests who should get together to receive from God and experience together the gift of communion; it is young people and not priests who should dialogue and get out young people of their age from nightclubs; it is adults, young people and children and not priests who should make Sundays beautiful; it is lay people and not priests who should see to their own formation and to the formation of others; it is the family and not priests which should educate children in faith. Catholic Action prepares lay people for all this.

It is a question of responsibility, which has nothing to do with the lack of priests, but is ontologically motivated for the simple reason that we are baptised, that we have all been washed in the blood of the Lamb and bought by Jesus at a high price.

The missionary nature of the Church would come out in full force if the church truly lived up to it and did not disfigure itself or returned to the Old Testament.

2. We are all called, each one of us

There are some very beautiful representations of the Risen Christ where he descends into hell and raises, from the misery of death with no hope of salvation, all men and takes Adam and Eve by the hand. Precisely, the Council says that Baptism is as if God takes every man by the hand and tells him: I am assigning you an important task in life, that of being a Christian. You should feel that you have been called to do great things, to lead a beautiful life full of happiness for you and for all the others. Commit yourself to do something in life because I have put a fire, a light and salt into you. I show you so many ways which you can freely choose from. Whichever one you choose is part of this great task. Therefore, before God, no one can regard this call as generic. No one can be solely active or solely passive. We all have a general call to which we should reply and, in each case, this call takes a different colour in the rainbow of God's kingdom:

- the call to a lay way of life, which has a consistency in itself as it is the testimony of the Kingdom of God in temporal realities and which many times leads to a call for matrimony, to form a family or towards becoming a consecrated lay person;
- the call to the ministerial priesthood, which is an effective testimony in the Church of the primacy of the grace of Christ our Shepherd, Head and Bridegroom, and by which the Church is edified;
- the call to a consecrated way of life which testifies to the transcendence of the Kingdom of God regarding men's values or doings and testifies to the call for eternal life in history and in society.

This first dimension, therefore, renders even the existence of a Christian, who decides out of necessity or opportunely, to live his baptismal priesthood fully without any *other* specific vocation, ecclesologically significant. We can think of sick people who have no choice as regards their vocation as they are not in a position to get married or join a religious order; or others who decide to live their professional life as a mission, without getting married or taking votes. These live their baptismal priesthood by exercising the virtue of charity.

So we should stop distinguishing between priests and lay people but to look at ourselves as sharing the same Baptismal priesthood with specific vocations, charisms and ministries.

3. Priests, consecrated persons and lay people in the educational field

The dignity, which the church enjoys, makes it ideal to face the challenges of our times. We can think of, for example, the educational field.

Is the Christian community in a position to educate or is it interested only in faith, religion and the supernatural? Maybe, it is only oriented towards some set interests that it does not aspire towards freedom, towards the autonomy of the human person or to care for young people. It is too much to expect a body, which is so narrow (some even say closed) such as the catholic one, as to be in a position to develop educational models which could be up to standard in our modern times. More than questions which are badly put, these are prejudices which abound in many places and are passed underhandedly even in schools. These show that, ideologically in religion, there is still a weakness and that in the Christian faith there are constraints, evident in the way of thinking, which make it impossible for fundamental principles to be rediscovered.

We strongly affirm and can prove from experience that a Christian way of life is a fundamental and unique contribution towards man's formation. If today's man has reached the maturity he has and the ability to open up and conform society to the promotion of fundamental human rights, to a great extent, he owes this to Christianity and to the figure of Jesus, who can be presented as the ideal and the centre of human and communitarian life. Christ is the perfect man and Christian education is "...educating in Christ's way of thinking to look at history as He does; to judge life as He does; to choose and love as He does; to hope as He teaches; to live in Him in communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit..." (The Italian Episcopal Conference Basic Document for Catechisme No. 38). This should be the mentality of a believer.

The historical figure of Jesus, even independently from the faith which we profess in Him, is a unique example of humanity, able to orientate consciences towards a full, mature humanity dedicated to the common good. If the work of the Church, of the Christian community, in all its different components, right down to the most basic one which is the parish, had to be that of contributing towards the education of humanity, this is in itself a major contribution.

This educating force within the church is expressed clearly through educational projects, well-prepared personnel and points of view which are shared even by groups which have secular tendencies. Catholic Action is also this: it provides a space wherein one does not satisfy himself by sticking to duties and practices but lives his faith within a formation project which follows the most modern pedagogical methods. The main aim of this organisation is not that of getting together a crowd of people, which enjoys being happily together, in itself already a great contribution in today's world. In actual fact, it is an intergenerational communion of persons who dedicate themselves to one another and all together to the Christian and human community, with a well-defined educational plan, always updated to meet current needs, and which helps people to live, grow and believe as Christians. It firmly believes in the God of Jesus Christ and finds in faith the profound meaning of life, the values which direct it and the action to follow. It loves the actual church in which it lives and dedicates itself therein to serve all humanity. It helps people to open up to God's gifts and this is the fundamental pillar of education at all times. It opens up adults and young people to the religious dimension; to reflect on the fundamental questions in life and to be able to assume responsibilities in society. It continually engages personnel, qualified in dealing with the different age-groups, and leaves ample space for interaction. It is enough to say that young people and adults collaborate in the education of children and they assume responsibility to organise groups, to provide educational aids and draft plans and projects so as to help children, right from a tender age, experience the joy of living their life and their faith.

Like CA, all the other church associations, movements, groups and the whole community are involved in the educational field.

4. The secular character

I would not like to keep you in the dark about important questions which are being discussed by theologians, so please bear with me as I speak about a question which cannot be considered as secondary. Is being a lay person anything less or more than being a Christian? Being a priest, is it anything more or less than being a Christian? You could answer this question by reflecting on the relations between the Church and the world and temporal realities. Who should see to the sanctification of the world, to the task of imbuing the world with the Gospel? We could reply: you priests are in the church to hear our confessions, to convince us of God's love with the Eucharist

while we, as lay people, carry out our mission in the world through our lives and not by preaching. No. We are all co-responsible for all the life of the Church but we will come back to this later on.

The clever theologian Erio Castellucci says: "The relation with the world or "the secular character" is the proper characteristic of all the Church but it is also true that every baptised can live this concretely according to the specific way he lives his own vocation. The *lay person* is thus the baptised person, who can cover the whole range of relations between the Church and the world by *fully* activating the missionary orientations of the Church towards society. He commits himself to translate the Gospel in family life, in his work, in trade unions, in politics, in business, in economics etc. In this way, the lay person participates actively in the building of the Kingdom of God starting from history. The *consecrated* person, like the *priest* and the *bishop* accept their limitations when it comes to their relations with the world. Their charisms, roles and ministries cannot be effective and their testimony cannot be coherent if they are involved in specific secular spheres such as the public sector, in business, in political parties or as trade union leaders.

This auto-limitation is not "ontological" but only "pastoral". The Church maintains that, in certain situations and at certain times, the ordained minister's call is to announce the Gospel and to guide the community in the practice of charity. This is more in keeping with the radical testimony of poverty, chastity and obedience which the consecrated person is called to give.

Therefore, it is not *the lay person* who adds on something to his being a *Christian* but it is the non-lay person, that is the ordained and consecrated Christian person, who "renounces" to carry out a type of service to the world and to the Church, contained in the potentialities of the Baptism, in order to better preserve another service to the world and to the Church, which is also rooted in the Baptism and implements other aspects of the Christian life. (cfr Pastoral Orientations Nov 2010).

We have tried to define the identity of a lay person. So far it has all been very theoretical so now we are going to see what qualities a Christian person should cultivate in order to lead a truly Christian life today. Here are some of these equalities:

5. Lay people, witnesses of hope

Today, lay people are expected to take a free decision to be witnesses of hope. After the frustration which resulted from Calvary, the apostles continued with their lives. They accepted the Risen Lord who entered their life with full force, upset their plans and launched them out into the roads of the world. They needed "the cure of a resurrection" to help them understand that as from that moment, their life could not be what it was before. The Risen Christ could definitely not be considered as a consolation in their fears. He had to become the new announcement which they had to make, the true and unique announcement. If they thought that they were to go round preaching about a good and generous vision of life, they were greatly mistaken. They were not expected to tour the world to tell people how moving Christmas was; what beautiful message Jesus gave on the mountain; how nice it was to translate the law, the Torah with all its simple, touching and easy to understand parables; nor to tell the world about the miracles which Jesus performed. How beautiful it was when we were with him, it was the end of the world for us. He was truly a friend, he had a way of looking at you which cleansed your soul... This is not what God called them for. Jesus wanted them to go and show, through their new way of life, the meaning of believing in the Crucified, Risen Lord. This is what they had to announce – not a consoling message but a demanding and profound message which can change our way of thinking and of living. This is the testimony which the world needs today, a testimony which questions life's religious dimension.

6. The lay person is a contemplative

This is the first requisite. After having spent your time in contemplating him, praying to him and listening to His word, the Risen Lord should change your eyes, your mouth and your heart. He is a mystery to whom we should expose ourselves as we do to the sun and to the air in order to live. In His face, we should read His love, even to the last drop which He shed. We should enter His wounds to understand the horror of our sins and the malice which taints the world. In His radiant light of a new being, of a son who abandoned himself in his Father's arms, we should discover the

reason for his tenacity and the secret of his life. Lay people, who contemplate the Face of Christ, say before anything else, that He, his person and his life, is the centre of their belief. The Christian lay people, who came before us, have reflected on the mystery of that Face and have confirmed their amazement, their piety, their love and their faith. Today we still need lay people who know how to immerse their gaze in his to let him save them by the sweetness of his mercy; to let themselves be enlightened and oriented by his Word; to enter into the intimacy of his colloquy with the Father. The crossing of these looks is very often like that of Peter, the repented traitor and Jesus; that sweet glance between Mary and Jesus; that between the beloved John and Jesus; that between Magdalene, eagerly awaiting the resurrection and Jesus and the Risen Christ. In these looks, the way of looking at life, finds that fulfilment which the rich young man wished for but refused. This contemplation equips us with the fundamental consciousness of the Christian beliefs. These will no longer be abstract truths but will become an experience of a true dialogue with Jesus. It is perfectly true that the world will not be saved by a formula.

A space is needed where a youth, a child or an adult may say to someone: I want to have a full life, I am not interested in half measures, and I cannot conform to established ways of behaving. I have one life to live and I want to enjoy it to the full. Do not tell me that I have to keep my feet on the ground; that I have to be sensible; that the time for folly is passed. I do not want to have any limitations; I am not interested whether it is a life without risks or full of trouble. I want to enjoy it to the full. Well, Jesus looked at him, but he lowered his eyes. Jesus was reading in his heart his uncontrolled attachment to his riches.

Then Jesus fired at him a barrage of verbs: Go, sell, give, come and follow me.

The Christian life of every lay person is the space for this continuous provocation. Work to unbind hearts and to make the face of Jesus shine. Do this with humility and without expecting a successful outcome but accepting your incapacity and making an effort to believe and trust your life in God's hands. If the Christian community does not aim God's verbs at men, it is not a Christian parish community but only a Mc Donald of church things. Do not propose to youths, men and women only that, which they can do in their lives, but also the dreams and the aspirations of what they wish to be and which together they are trying to achieve.

7. The lay person is a collaborator of the Holy Spirit's interior presence

During his lifetime, every man and women goes through times when he questions, projects, aspires and changes. The Holy Spirit lives in each and every one and imprints the traits of the humanity of Jesus in them. They become the collaborators of the Holy Spirit when they desire to be witnesses of hope. The Holy Spirit waits until people open up to the joyful news of the resurrection but very often there is nothing to help man to open up to this call and our modern mentality very often draws us away from this desire and men are left to fend for themselves. They are like the apostles just after the Resurrection, maybe happy and satisfied but closed among themselves. In man's heart there is the silent word of God which interprets, corrects, sustains and shows man his own particular way to follow in life. Everyone has within him the Holy Spirit, who instructs him as to how he can make his faith grow through the simple and dramatic events of human life. The lay person who is called to be an educator and a witness of hope is like an accomplice with the inexplicable and complex intuitions of the Holy Spirit. He knows that he can rely on His support and on His presence and sets out to reveal Him in the consciences of the men and women of our times.

8. It is better to argue than to enjoy the peace of the cemetery

Lay people do not become true Christians by going to Mass occasionally and stealthily or by participating in traditional processions or in sporadic religious functions. A Sunday Mass, well prepared, lived and put to practice in daily life is surely a strong push towards a saintly life. They do not need schools, although these are always necessary, to have a strong faith. They need an ongoing experience of reflection and participation; they have to learn how to participate in communitarian discussions; they have to be trained to look at reality from the ideals which inspire it and from the experiences of simple communion among friends, like that in an association or movement. The first aim is to regenerate one's own faith and not to undertake any ecclesial

charge, whether this is done freely or out of necessity. Putting too much stress on activity empties people from within. Unfortunately, there is a tendency, in our pastoral work with Christian communities, to try to do away with lay associations. The excuse for doing this could be the lack of communion or the different opinions regarding the presentation of a Christian way of living. Very often, it is the temptation to think that everything is starting with us and before, no one did anything about faith. Sometimes, this still means focusing on intra-ecclesial spheres. For a pastor, who is not so shrewd, facing a group of people, who, although members of an important association, cannot voice an opinion or discuss but focus on devotional practices and are always ready to comply, is the most he can take, but very often, the community is impoverished and dies. Very often it is said that it is better to argue, if this is the fear, than to experience the peace that prevails in a cemetery.

We could highlight certain areas in the life of the church wherein a generous presence and the specialised dedication of lay people are needed, but wherein also their organisational network and their pedagogical, social and political systems are of the utmost importance,:

- in the affective sphere we should go beyond the instability which prevails and discover the true source of love;
- work should regain its dignity and should be looked upon as a sign of solidarity and as something vital;
- the care of the weak as an occasion for solidarity;
- customs and values should be regarded as a patrimony which should be passed on to the younger generations in order to help them rediscover their roots and so be able to plan the future;
- citizenship as a place of concrete exercise of one's rights and duties; of cohabitation with all and of culture of peace.

9. A much needed decisive step today: co-responsibility

In June 2009, Pope Benedict said to his Roman diocese: "This opening to universality materializes in the Cross and in the Resurrection of Christ. Saint Paul says that, on the cross, Christ pulled down the dividing wall. When he gave us His Body, He reunited us, in this His Body, to make us one. In the communion of the "Body of Christ, we all become one people, the People of God, where, quoting Saint Paul again, we are all one and there is no longer any distinction or difference between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free but Christ is all and in all. He has pulled down the wall which distinguishes peoples, races, cultures: we are all united in Christ ...Therefore contemplating the concept of "People of God" and "Body of Christ": in Christ we truly become People of God. And "People of God" means "all": starting from the Pope down to the last baptised child. Every baptised is co-responsible for Christ's mission in the world"...

At the same time, we have to improve our pastoral planning, so that, while respecting the vocation and the roles of consecrated and lay people, **gradually we start promoting co-responsibility in all the members of the People of God. This entails a change in the mentality, a change which concerns particularly lay people. We have to change our mentality of considering them as «collaborators» of the clergy to that of looking upon them as being truly «co-responsible» for the Church itself and for its work. We have to consolidate a mature and committed laity.** Our communities should be always aware of the fact that they are «a Church» because Christ, the eternal Word of God, has called them together and has made of them His People. This common awareness of all the baptised that they are a Church does not in any way lessen the responsibility of parish priests. It is up to you, dear parish priests to see to the spiritual and apostolic growth of those who are already zealous and committed in the parishes: they are the nucleus of the community which ferments the others.

10. Co-responsibility of lay people in the church is not built on specialists, but on believers

It is people's faith which is declining. Gradually, we are realizing that people are no longer forming part of the Christian community and the reference to the parish is becoming always more

insignificant. The way the Church thinks about the facts of life is put aside and in the Christian community, while specialisations grow, adult Christians in faith, and families, rooted in the Gospel, are diminishing. Thus, the cultivation of common lay people becomes even more necessary. The richness of a parish is not measured by the number of initiatives it undertakes or by the number of pastoral operators but by the faith of its sons and daughters who daily dedicate their lives to the Gospel. Our parishes generally live by what happens and crops up spontaneously. Pastoral life is deeply engaged in doing institutional things, so that we care more and more to hold together organization, Christian initiation initiatives, sacramental life and other celebrations. These are usually well planned and executed but very often do not succeed in building a planned journey towards sanctity in people's lives. In the youth world we are just surviving: maybe they come to mass on successive Sundays, they confess three or four times a year, they attend for some activity with friends, fortunately they have a father who pushes them. Every now and then they disappear because of sport activities or sickness or because they fall in love. The animators are full of good will but the activities of the group do not leave them time for themselves... I could go on describing the life of a parish where unfortunately, very often, the binding element is lacking. Mistakenly, we look upon the activities themselves as the binding element of the different pastoral projects rather than a life of faith which is much more than this. It is something more personal and more radical. The priest should present and sustain a journey towards sanctity which makes all the difference and which lay people have a right to.

11. We do not need Talibans, but authentic lay believers

New important areas for the laity: a wider vision of religion as being an important factor when it comes to identity. The question of religion is raising its head in our world. Those who think that they have buried religion, as a phenomenon enclosed in a niche and that it is destined to disappear in today's competitive race, are very much mistaken. A growing urge for that which is religious and for answers to help man express himself in dignified terms is emerging. The reasons for this phenomenon are clear to everybody. The idea that it is better not to believe in anything, thus avoiding the risk of wars instigated by religious convictions, is gaining ground. The search for God is given as the reason for these wars but the motivation behind them is much less noble. They use religion to gain credibility and popular consensus. In the world of the media and of culture, the phenomenon is taken very lightly. It is simplistically looked upon as auto sufficiency and as a folkloristic appendix to popular expression. This is far from being an intelligent conclusion and is not based on any research. This new world does not need Talibans but it needs lay people, lay believers, who regard their secular character as a value which imprints the strength of an intelligent faith and the novelty of intellectual honesty and human sense on their personal and social life. And it is even more important that the laity consider it their task to undertake to face civil conflicts, which cunningly crop up in politics, in family life, in the education of children, in popular traditions and in parental relations. Lay people, who involve themselves in politics and strive to build bridges of peace in today's world, should know their religion in a way which goes beyond comparative studies. Their religion should be rooted in an intelligent and mature sense of belonging. In this respect, lay Christians should be able to present true and profound reflections even in political and diplomatic spheres and in spheres where peace treaties and cease fires are signed.

This requires an effort to widen the space of rationality, which Pope Benedict repeatedly speaks about.

12. Lay character: aim with all one's might towards sanctity

One's faith as a believer is not lived side by side with the world but within the world. Lay people should become saints in the concrete realities of their everyday life, in their family life, their married life, their work and studies just as priests do when they celebrate the Eucharist and the Sacraments. In my opinion, there has been too much concentration on the internal life of the Church, thus losing the baptismal vocation as a fullness of the Christian life, oriented towards sanctity. In many of our reflections, we have changed the religious choice into a pastoral choice where pastoral means ecclesiastical. A lay person does not become a saint if he prays the lauds and vespers well but if he is empowered through these prayers:

1. to be active and responsible for building human and humanizing spaces in the places where he lives: in the areas of study, work, free time, relaxation and friendship. This includes also the humanisation of relations, the acceptance of one another and the small and great stories in life that everyone starts reacting against insignificance, impersonal attitudes, words and feelings.
2. To be able to set up new ways of building relationships to counteract the current virtual escape. Life starts with dreams but nothing materializes simply by people looking at face book and emails. Life is a poem, a mystery, not a sequence of photos. It is made of faces and not of electronic addresses.
3. To be able to free himself from being imprisoned in the present. Therefore he needs to look at the past and at his roots so that he may redefine his proper identity and move towards the future. Time is a continuous line: every man is one of the many dots which make up this line. There is an infinite number of dots which precede a particular dot and so many other which come after. Someone has indicated this line, has given it a direction and has established what comes before and after: it is Jesus. He is the Lord of time and knows how to establish its dimension.
4. To make of his life a story and not a collection of episodes; "if our lives do not become a story, there is no way in the world to live them"(Coupland). There is a thread which links one event to the other, our life is not a disoriented succession of adventures, of tension, of anxiety and of small or great satisfactions but it is a story with an original and mysterious plan which has to be discovered and fulfilled.
5. To face the 'aloneness' experienced by believers, for which a strong consciousness of truth is required. Every youth feels alone and every believer feels isolated. The value of truth does not depend on the number of people who uphold it but on truth itself.
6. To assume small or big personal and collective responsibilities. It is impossible to live with our heads buried within our four walls thinking that the world around us should adapt itself.
7. To acquire the ability to discern, without however, escaping from the information and the exposure to mass media. Communication and its means decide the destinies of democracies, markets, movements of people and capitals and even our feelings and personal decisions. Either we are prepared for this or we become its prey.

This does not happen *automatically* simply by going round the parish or by organising the strong liturgical periods. The most dangerous temptation is to think that things happen automatically and expect a life of faith to grow. I wish to point out that we should educate people how to pray and not teach them prayers only. We should help them to develop a way of praying and not give them rules; to have a guide and not only a friend; to have a conscience and not an agenda; to be part of a community and not only of a group.

Citizens of two cities

In his writings, *Diogneto* describes the position of Christians in the world by means of an image which seems to fit particularly lay people's condition. "Christians are indistinguishable from other men either by nationality, language or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life... With regard to dress, food and manner of life in general, they follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be living in, whether it is Greek or foreign. And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through... Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country... They live in the flesh, but they are not governed by the desires of the flesh. They pass their days upon earth, but they are citizens of heaven. Obedient to the laws, they yet live on a level that transcends the law...1.

Christians are therefore citizens of two cities: that of heaven, which makes them witnesses of values different from those proclaimed by the world and, at the same time, citizens of the city of men, with whom they share culture, concrete conditions, responsibilities, expectations and hopes.

Above all, *lay Christians live* their original adherence to God *in the world* ¹. Living in the world means that one does not withdraw or separate oneself from the ordinary conditions of men and women of their time in order to be faithful to the Lord. It means living one's family, professional and social life just like all fellow men of the time and sharing responsibility in the development and evolution of current history.

The fact that lay people do not cut themselves off from the world is an explicit acknowledgement that the world, human life and history are good... In fact, the world was good when it came from God's hands. It still enjoys the impression of the act of love by which it was created and which drew God's satisfaction: "God saw that everything was good" (Cfr *Gen* 1). Sin, which has dulled the beauty and harmony of the original design, has not obliterated the divine mark and has not made the world less precious in God's eyes. The fact, that God sent and sacrificed His Son to restore the world and all things to their original beauty, confirms this and makes the world more precious, more worthy to be looked at with interest and sympathy. It is not only the extreme sacrifice which proves the divine value of the world but also the bond which the Lord has established with it. He has not saved it from a distance but He inserted himself in its history, culture, humanity...

Therefore, the lay Christian should love the world. He should share from within the common events of every man by imitating the way the Lord immersed himself in the ordinary and simple life of the people of His time. The love to the world, - to men, things, situations and realities - is what renders Christ visible to others and what testifies that God too loves the world, human history and every man's life.

The lay Christian is nevertheless a citizen even of another city, in which, as a citizen he has a horizon which goes beyond an earthly one; in which the rules are: the giving of oneself, being of service, mildness and commitment towards justice... the primacy of the human person; where the head is a crucified Lord; where the only condition to belong is to accept the wisdom of the cross as a criterion for interpreting life.

It is clear that the two logics are in conflict with one another; that these "two cities" are concurrently present in a lay Christian's conscience and should also be evident together in his daily life. This dual belonging creates a tension especially when the two differ. There are moments when the two identities contrast one another in diverse ways:

* in the explicit form of **conflict** - when, as one belonging to the "celestial city", one has to oppose, contest or refuse ways of behaviour or ways of life which are unacceptable by accepting the challenge of living the conflict in coherent adherence with the mildness of the Gospel and with an attitude of love and service;

* in the form of **incomprehension** - which calls for a disposition to be ready to testify on your own, paying even with isolation your belonging to a world which is different from the earthly one;

* in an atmosphere of **obscurity** - the experience which results from the tension between the two identities/belongings may be described as **obscure** as it is difficult to understand how one could be faithful to the two cities at the same time. Yet he has to decide and take a position.

The lay person risks his faithfulness to the values of the Gospel while living in a precarious, uncertain and complex context which is his daily life; he plays his faithfulness to the celestial city within the earthly city. When presented with the absolute values and the relative current values one is completely free to choose and it is a decision which calls for courage, inventiveness and creativity. The values of the Gospel are not applied, in a perfect and absolute way, to familiar, professional, economic and political choices of our daily lives. Risking your faith means assuming responsibility to take position and to make historical choices; even before this, risk means interpreting, as an intelligent Christian, the signs of our times. This prophetic task becomes even more difficult for a lay Christian if the two cities have distanced themselves considerably from one

another, not so much in the objectivity of the respective choices but in the perceptions which we hold about them.

It is so difficult for us, Christians and for our communities, to read our times because the gap between the two belongings and the features which mark our life, have gone wider apart within ourselves. Maybe, this gap has widened so much because we have not felt strongly enough that we are citizens of the city of men. Also, maybe, because we have tried to lessen the tension, resulting from our dual belonging, by closing ourselves within the celestial homeland, forgetting that this land belongs to the future. This future has to be prepared through a present which should not deny our being warmly, intensely involved in the human events which are also ours, as believers.

It is encouraging for us to remember that in these last few years, the church has launched the beatification process of lay people like Lazzati, La Pira and De Gasperi, who have lived the crucifying dimension of being lay people. They did not give in to the temptation of giving up being loyal citizens of both cities and of identifying themselves too much with only one of them. I would like to call this ongoing interior human search in our everyday events as a search for God. Our search for God cannot take place outside our journey on earth but within this journey, towards a more intense and fuller humanity. The only way of keeping our experience of faith central in our lives, is by reflecting deeply upon life itself, by striving to become more conscious of it and by committing ourselves to understand it, narrate it and explain it... it is a way for not leaving it out of our experience of faith. It is in the depth of one's own conscience that a Christian, that every man, very often in an undecipherable way, discovers within himself the longing for God.