

THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE LAY CAMILLIAN FAMILY WITH THE ORDER OF CAMILLIANS AND THE CHURCH

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Introduction

The prophecy of St. Camillus who predicted the spread throughout the world of the *little plant* of the Order that he had founded has also been fulfilled as regards the *Lay Camillian Family* (LCF). Indeed, today the LCF is present in all the continents of the world, multiplying the number of arms stretched out towards those who find themselves going through the difficult season of suffering. The pathway that has led this association to the point at which it is today is very variegated and has been conditioned by numerous factors of a socio-cultural and religious character. My paper does not have the goal of addressing in a detailed way the history of the Lay Camillian Family, which, indeed, has already been the subject of numerous articles, including mine, even though we still do not have a systematic analysis of the history of the LCF. In a necessary reference to its history, I will thus confine myself to referring solely to the events that help us to understand the relationship of this association with the Order of Camillians and the Church.

The Relationship with the Order of Camillians

Father Mario Vanti, the most authoritative historian of our Institute, wrote that within the Order of Camillians an ‘almost congenital’ need has been present to aggregate lay people to the exercise of its apostolic mission. This need was perceived as early as the beginnings of the Institute, as is attested to by the Bull that founded the Order, *Illius qui pro gregis*, which was emanated in 1591 by Gregory XIV. In this document one can read: ‘The Superior General, and with his authorisation the other Superiors of the local communities, can aggregate and bring together in his own Congregation other secular lay people, clerics and priests to exercise the same works of mercy and charity’.

Not only endowed with a prophetic spirit but also a practical man, St. Camillus did not wait a long time before putting into practice what was granted by this Bull. In a letter to Fr. Biagio Oppertis, in 1592, he wrote: ‘To the glory of the Lord, on All Saints Day we will begin the Congregation of secular men who will be of some utility to the Institute’. To carry out this initiative, he offered a hall and made available to the group a *learned and spiritual* religious. That during the first years of life of the Order the project to involve lay men in the mission of the Institute was strongly valued, is attested to by the fact that it was placed on the agenda of the second General Chapter which was celebrated in 1599.

Two Observations

These brief references to the emergence and the first steps of an association of lay men instituted by the Order of Camillians and directed towards cooperation in the exercise of works of charity in the world of suffering and health should be completed with two observations.

The period when Camillus reached Rome and began to work in the Hospital of St. James, that is to say the second half of the sixteenth century, was characterised by an extraordinary flourishing of lay associations which were very active and were directed towards expressing their own spirituality by responding to ‘the new forms of poverty of Renaissance society: religious ignorance, the abandonment of minors, the neglect of the poorest sick people’. Camillus breathed in the atmosphere of those lay movements. Indeed, as emerges from a document of 1527, even before founding the Order he enrolled in the *Company of St. James of the Incurables* and, later, in the *Marian Congregation* founded by the Jesuits. He himself wanted to form another such group, namely a *Company of Pious and Good Men*, that is to say of lay men involved in radically changing how sick

people were cared for, moving care from the pole of self-interest, which in no uncertain terms Camillus called lust for gain, to the pole of *charity*.

When the *Company of Pious and Good Men* became a religious Order, in Camillus his attention paid to lay men, and the role that they could play working with the religious of the Order in providing complete care to the sick, did not disappear. This explains what led him to ask the Holy See to place in the 'Bull of Foundation' of the Order the authorisation to aggregate lay men to the Institute that he had founded and then to Institute the *Congregation of Secular Men*.

When observing this initiative of St. Camillus, we cannot escape a feeling of admiration. This man, whom St. Filippo Neri did not consider capable of founding a Congregation, proved that he possessed to a high degree that *spiritual intelligence* that enables a person to grasp the signs of the times and implement projects inspired by them.

From the documents on the aggregation of lay men to the Order of the first years of the foundation of the Order of Camillians, it appears clear that such an initiative, promoted at the outset by St. Camillus, was adopted by the Order and therefore entered the programmes that it pursued, as was observed above in the reference to the second General Chapter. This enables us, on the one hand, to affirm that the current Lay Camillian Family has its roots in the project conceived of, and implemented by, St. Camillus, and, on the other, to emphasise the responsibility of the Order for the continuation of this initiative, adapting its relations with it to the socio-cultural and religious changes that have taken place down the centuries.

A Step Ahead in Time

We will now take a step ahead in time and move forward to 1971, the year when the Order of the Camillians in Vienna celebrated its General Chapter. On that occasion, those taking part in the General Chapter also put on their agenda the subject of cooperation with lay people *in a way where one can perceive a return to the origins* of the Order. It is worthwhile reading anew the text drawn up during that meeting of the General Chapter: 'Although it remains a fact that to take part fully in the life of the Institute a personal choice is required to follow Christ in the profession of the evangelical counsels and a full and unconditional acceptance of the Camillian mission in the world, we believe that one can expand the circle of the Order into a *broader organisation* in which the religious would constitute the animating nucleus, welcoming those who feel attracted by our ideal and who work apostolically in the field of health'. Read attentively, these words contain an echo of the words written in the Bull of Foundation of the Order and in the letter of St. Camillus to Fr. Oppertis.

From St. Camillus to the General Chapter of Vienna

If the proposal of the General Chapter of 1971 was to see itself as a connection with the project of St. Camillus, then a question arises: what happened to the Congregations/Associations of the laity during the period that runs from the death of our founder in 1614 to the assembly of Camillians in Vienna? The scarce documentation that exists does not enable us to outline a precise picture of the development of the relationship between Camillian religious and lay people. However the information that has come down to us attests to the existence of a rather fragmentary continuity of associations connected with our Order and also points to some of their characteristics. These associations were connected to a community; they tended to privilege spiritual service for sick people or programmes of prayers for the sick, above all the dying, paralleling the development of the Order which, starting in the seventeenth century, tended to give more importance to the spiritual accompanying of sick people. In their relationship with religious communities, they underwent highs and lows. The historian Fr. Vanti writes that the Superiors commanded them and they were commanded by them. The members of the associations had their preferences and their needs: their preferences about the father sent by

the Superiors to preside over them and their needs as regards preferred practices of piety that were often imposed or almost imposed.

The Climate after the Second Vatican Council

To return to the wish that emerged at the General Chapter of 1971 to 'expand the circle of the Order into a broader organisation', it is important to identify the factors that led to the development of this proposal.

The most important factor was certainly the celebration of the Second Vatican Council which witnessed the promotion of an ecclesiology of communion that led to going beyond the pyramid structure of the Church – where the hierarchy (bishops and priests) was at the top and the religious, and above all the laity, were kept in a state of subjection – and imposing the image of the Church as the People of God in which every Christian feels involved and made jointly responsible for the promotion of the Kingdom. Indeed, as one can read in the apostolic exhortation *Vita consecrata*: 'The challenges of evangelization are such that they cannot be effectively faced without the cooperation, both in discernment and action, of all the Church's members. It is difficult for individuals to provide a definitive answer; but such an answer can arise from encounter and dialogue. In particular, effective communion among those graced with different charisms will ensure both mutual enrichment and more fruitful results in the mission in hand' (n. 74a). The constitution *Lumen Gentium* on the Church and the decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem* on the laity generated during those years strong and productive discussions.

Another factor should be seen in the commitment adopted by many Camillian religious, starting in the second half of the last century, to accompanying health-care workers and socio/health-care workers not only of Camillian institutions but also of state ones in order to help them to live and exercise their profession in the light of Christian values.

The Response to the General Chapter of Vienna

What was the response of the Order to the wishes of the General Chapter of Vienna? As often happens with Institutes, it came from individual religious. This leads us to recognise the important contribution to the birth of the Lay Camillian Family offered by Father Alfonso Pastore in Brazil and Father Paul Haschek in Austria. In this latter country this association managed to give itself a structure and to draw up programmes of formation that drew upon the growing literature on the Camillian charism and Camillian spirituality and to expand into nearby countries, above all in Hungary, through the work of a great apostle, Fr. Anton Gots.

These initiatives, together with further activities pursued in other countries (above all in Colombia), brought about the *intervention of the central government of the Order* which, for the first time in the history of the Institute, organised an international conference with the participation of lay people and religious of all the Provinces of the Order. This meeting took place on 21-23 May 1992.

It is important to observe that at that conference the participants did not talk about the Lay Camillian Family but, rather, solely about the relationship between Camillian religious and lay people, above all those who work in our institutions. How could that communion be achieved by which they could work in a united way in their common mission?

Thought about the Lay Camillian Family developed over the next three-year period and found suitable space in the General Chapter of 1995, in which a group of lay people took part for the first time. It should not be forgotten that some important Church documents had been drawn up that examined the relationship between religious and lay people. In the document which formed a part of the preparations for the Synod of Bishops on consecrated life of 1994 we read: 'Recently many communities and Institutes have developed a network of associations or friends, priests or lay people, who share their spirituality and work with their mission. Here is a reality that is growing and is still looking for suitable forms but which allows consecrated communities to organise their lives in the Church and their specific apostolates in a better way. These new pathways can play

an important role in supporting people dedicated to a spiritual search who want to involve themselves in the Church in a specific field. These are places that offer an opportunity to create settings for sharing, for faith, and for support for a common mission, experienced in a different form but carried out in the same spirit' (n. 98). Today a significant number of Institutes, often because of new situations, have come to the belief that their charism can be shared with lay people. These last are thus invited to take part in a more intense way in the spirituality and the mission of that Institute. One may say that in the wake of historical experiences such as those of various secular Orders or Third Orders, a new chapter began that is rich in hopes in the history of the relationships between consecrated men and women and the laity (*Vita consecrata*, n. 54).

The work done during the General Chapter was fruitful because it helped to distinguish the Lay Camillian Family from the other numerous groups of lay people connected with the Order for reasons of cooperation or friendship. For many religious and lay people it was not easy – and for some of them this is still the case – to accept the formation of an association whose characteristics differed from those of other groups. Help in progressively clarifying the identity of the Lay Camillian Family came from the drawing up of statutes which were approved by the General Chapter of 2001 and by the Holy See the following year.

From that moment, the Lay Camillian Family began its journey which continued in a happy way, extending its presence to new countries, facing up with courage to the inevitable difficulties, and looking forward with the certainty that it would fulfil one of the dreams cultivated with love by St. Camillus.

Final Observations

1. The Lay Camillian Family was born and grew in constant interaction with the Order of Camillians, bringing back to life, more than any other group of lay people (people who work with us in our works, volunteers...), the project that St. Camillus implemented at the beginning of the Institute. Therefore, it is not inexact to see the LCF as the contemporary translation – with all the differences due to socio-cultural and religious changes – of the *Association of Secular Men* that St. Camillus wanted.

2. Although the relationship between the Order of Camillians and the Lay Camillian Family is very clear in its statutes and in the decree of the Holy See, it nonetheless needs to grow in certain areas, above all in that of *reciprocity*. For this to take place, a commitment is required on the part of both *partners* of the relationship who are called both to give and to receive. Reciprocity is achieved at various levels: in meetings of communities of religious with groups of the Lay Camillian Family so as to create fraternity, an exchange of opinions, the sharing of projects, the transmission of the spirituality that is typical of the Institute, and mutual enrichment. The apostolic exhortation *Vita consecrata* speaks very clearly about this necessary reciprocity and affirms that one of the positive consequences of the relationships between religious and lay people is 'to facilitate more intense cooperation between consecrated persons and the laity in view of the Institute's mission. Moved by the examples of holiness of the consecrated members, lay men and women will experience at first hand the spirit of the evangelical counsels, and will thus be encouraged to live and bear witness to the spirit of the Beatitudes, in order to transform the world according to God's design. The participation of the laity often brings unexpected and rich insights into certain aspects of the charism, leading to a more spiritual interpretation of it and helping to draw from it directions for new activities in the apostolate. In whatever activity or ministry they are involved, consecrated persons should remember that before all else they must be expert guides in the spiritual life, and in this perspective they should cultivate "the most precious gift: the spirit". For their part, the laity should offer Religious families the invaluable contribution of their "being in the world" and their specific service' (n. 55).

The call to responsibility that applies both to Camillian religious and to lay people is expressed in an anecdote with which I would like to end my paper.

'Once upon a time in the square of a city there was a wise man who answered the most disparate questions. One day, with the curious people who were listening to him there was a shepherd who had come down from the mountains with the intention of publicly shaming the 'storyteller'. The shepherd, after putting

a little bird in his fist concealed it and going up to the wise man said to him: "I have got a little bird in this fist: can you tell me whether it is alive or dead?" If he had said "it is dead" the shepherd would have opened his fist and the bird would have flown away. But the wise man, after thinking for a moment, answered: "the bird that you have got in your hand is as you want it: if you want it to be alive, it is alive; if you want it to be dead, it is dead!"

The message is clear: the future of the Lay Camillian Family is in our hands: in the hands of the religious and the laity. We can make it grow with the help of the Lord and St. Camillus or we can make it die. A great deal may depend on external circumstances but what is essential depends on us.