

The vocation of the laity and the charism of st. camillus de lellis

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The very title of the paper that was entrusted to me offers some indications as to how to explore the meaning of the vocation of the lay faithful, and more specifically of those lay people who live following the specific charism and the spirituality of St. Camillus.

We speak about ‘vocation’ in order to emphasise that our lives are not a chance wandering. They have a direction, an indication of the pathway to follow in order to live our lives with our gaze directed towards good, witnesses to the merciful love of the Lord, in order to carry out, during our lives, the life project that God conceived for us in the world in order to reach that destination towards which we are journeying.

We know, even if at times it is hard for us to recognise them and live them, that we have received from God many gifts: life, faith, an encounter with the Lord Jesus who points out to us the way to live in fullness, to live with the ‘joy of the Gospel’ in our hearts. For this reason, we should always be grateful for the profound joy that dwells within us, as the exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, which begins in the following way, says: ‘The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew’.

If Christ is at the centre of my life, this deep joy will dwell in me, a joy that nobody can take away from me, even at the most difficult and tiring moments of my life, even when suffering is present. I will have peace inside me if I know how to entrust myself to the Lord, who is the Father...this is not an easy journey, it is not even automatic, but it is possible to live the Christian life in this way, in faith, with the strength of prayer and the Word of God, with the help of the brothers and sisters who are at our side and of the Christian community.

Faith gives sense to life, it fills it with meaning; we are ‘called’ to do good and to demonstrate love and fraternity in our daily lives. This is a vocation that welcomes, deepens and develops the gift of baptismal consecration, the gift of being the children of God, the gift of the Holy Spirit that confirms and strengthens us in our faith and hope, the gift of the sacrament and in particular of the Eucharist.

At n. 15 of the apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate* of Pope Francis we read the following words: ‘Let the grace of your baptism bear fruit in a path of holiness. Let everything be open to God; turn to him in every situation. Do not be dismayed, for the power of the Holy Spirit enables you to do this, and holiness, in the end, is the fruit of

the Holy Spirit in your life (cf. *Gal 5:22-23*). When you feel the temptation to dwell on your own weakness, raise your eyes to Christ crucified and say: “Lord, I am a poor sinner, but you can work the miracle of making me a little bit better”. In the Church, holy yet made up of sinners, you will find everything you need to grow towards holiness. The Lord has bestowed on the Church the gifts of scripture, the sacraments, holy places, living communities, the witness of the saints and a multifaceted beauty that proceeds from God’s love, “like a bride bedecked with

And at n. 11 of the same apostolic exhortation we read: ‘The important thing is that *each believer discern his or her own path, that they bring out the very best of themselves, the most personal gifts that God has placed in their hearts (cf. 1 Cor 12:7), rather than hopelessly trying to imitate something not meant for them. We are all called to be witnesses, but there are many actual ways of bearing witness*’.

The lay vocation: called to live one’s faith and one’s baptismal consecration in the context of one’s own daily life, in one’s profession, one’s family, in social and political engagement, in voluntary work and in caring for the sick.

The Second Vatican Council, the documents of that Council, the Magisterium of the Church, and the biblical and theological studies of recent years have all sought to highlight, explore and develop the meaning and the value of the vocation of the laity, recognising *that each vocation has equal dignity and valuing the presence of women in the Church*. This is a pathway on an upward gradient that advances by small steps, steps that are at times arduous in the real life of the ecclesial community, with different durations and forms in different cultures, individual Christian communities and local Churches.

In my experience it is also a communal journey of thought, of listening to each other, of looking ahead as a community, of learning to see and read the needs of individuals and communities, in joint responsibility, as regards decision-making as well, for the good of the community. I am thinking specifically of local communities, parishes and groups that, for example, take responsibility for the sick of the community, or of a hospital, visiting them, providing them with care...Each lay person in the community to which they belong has their own place, according to the vocation that they have received, but we should remember that the first mandate of a Christian is *to proclaim; it is evangelisation* (Lk 9:1-6).

Believers live their faith and seek to bear witness to it specifically in the context of their own lives, work and families. As lay people, as the ‘people of God’, we are called first of all to engage in explicit proclaiming, in preaching, but our role primarily involves the witness of our lives: consistency, faithfulness, activity that also involves sacrifice, the ability to see the needs of those who are next to us, a positive outlook on the world, the exercise of justice, knowing that in the world there are many seeds of

good, so many hidden evangelical potentialities that encounter difficulty in emerging and shining, opportunities and experiences to be developed and positive relationships to be lived...through simple gestures, such as a smile, a caress, a meeting with a sick person, a gesture of courtesy towards a person who is alone, accompanying a sick person...we must believe that proclaiming the gospel is first of all beauty, a gift that the Lord gives to us, not mortification or sadness but joy, a deep joy that dwells in us. This is the joy of the encounter with the Lord Jesus who has made himself our brother and whom we also meet in the faces of our brothers and sisters.

In the apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et exultate* of Pope Francis on the call to holiness in the contemporary world, we read the following at n. 6: ‘Nor need we think only of those [saints] already beatified and canonized. The Holy Spirit bestows holiness in abundance among God’s holy and faithful people, for “it has pleased God to make men and women holy and to save them, not as individuals without any bond between them, but rather as a people who might acknowledge him in truth and serve him in holiness”. In salvation history, the Lord saved one people. We are never completely ourselves unless we belong to a people. That is why *no one is saved alone, as an isolated individual. Rather, God draws us to himself, taking into account the complex fabric of interpersonal relationships present in a human community. God wanted to enter into the life and history of a people*’.

This fact of being saved as a ‘people’ is a recurrent theme of the Magisterium of Pope Francis and I find that it is very significant and important for the experience of our lives.

The Lord has looked at us, he has turned his gaze to us and invited us to...*go forth...proclaim...heal the sick...*because this is what the Lord said to his disciples. And this is the heart of the Gospel in all epochs, for us as well, today. Proclaiming through our lives the good news of the risen Lord who defeated death. I often think about, and am struck by, the words of Jesus, and even more am I struck by what he achieved during his life on earth: he taught, he called men to him to be his disciples, and he attended to and healed many sick people. And he sent out his disciples, entrusting to them above all else two mandates: *the proclaiming of the Gospel and the healing of the sick*.

I feel a sense of gratitude for my vocation which is in the heart of the Gospel!

And Jesus did not send out his disciples alone – he sent them out ‘two by two’; he sent them out together.

We, too, have met the Lord: we set out to follow him on the pathway of care for our suffering brothers and sisters, the disabled, the dying, those who suffer in body and in spirit, the mentally ill. I will not dwell upon the meaning of ‘taking care’, of making

ourselves ‘neighbours’ near to those whom we meet on our road who have been left at the margins by society, abandoned, rejected. There is an image from the Gospel that is very dear to us, that narrated by Jesus in the text of the ‘Good Samaritan’. We, too, have accepted the invitation of Jesus to ‘go and do likewise’, to communicate love, the style of nearness.

A question: the Samaritan, too, had, like the others who had passed by before him on the road, things ‘to do’, he was expected...but he ‘saw’ with the look of love, of solidarity, the wounded man at the side of the road, and this made him stop to come to his aid, raising him up, attending to his wounds, and taking him to the inn where, paying out of his own pocket, he entrusted him to a man who could care for him.

We, with the rhythm of our days, with the many things that we have to do, do we know how to ‘see’ the brother or sister who is at the side of the road? Our vocation, the first witness to the faith that we profess, today, perhaps even more than yesterday, is to have a limpid and profound approach so that we do not pass by...not to halt at a superficial, if not indifferent, attitude to those frail, perhaps dirty, people who in some way disturb us...the deeds of free giving. A merciful outlook!

As Christians, our vocation first of all is to be, and to remain, ‘human’, conserving inside us the beauty of our humanity, participants in the lives of other people, aware that we make up a community, because none of us is born and lives alone. Despite everything, we do not lose hope! We express in, and with, the lives of our humanity supportive involvement, a fraternity that is able to give of itself, through acts of service, as well, at the side of those who are wounded by life

‘I care’ was the motto of a priest (Don Milani) at a small school in the mountains: he expressed his love for his pupils in that way, because ‘you matter’ to me, I am here for you.

In a world that is often not attentive to suffering, that is indifferent towards suffering, a world dominated by individualism which hurriedly forgets, which moves away from the look of those who suffer, which marginalises the elderly, we know that we can be a ‘sign’ of the presence of the Lord at the side of the sick, of an elderly person who is alone, of a disabled person, and of a person who is terminally ill, to bear witness to that person that the Lord himself makes himself a ‘neighbour’ to him or her, through our presence as well, our look, our caring service, prayer together, cultivating hope and sharing in it with those who are losing it.

Pope Francis often talks about the ‘*holy people of God*’. In a letter to Cardinal Ouellet of 2016, for example, he wrote, among other things: ‘Looking at the People of God is remembering that we all enter the Church as lay people. The first sacrament, which seals our identity forever, and of which we should always be proud, is Baptism.

Through Baptism and by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, (the faithful) “are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood” (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 10). Our first and fundamental consecration is rooted in our Baptism. No one has been baptized a priest or a bishop. They baptized us as lay people and it is the indelible sign that no one can ever erase. It does us good to remember that the Church is not an elite of priests, of consecrated men, of bishops, but that everyone forms the faithful Holy People of God. To forget this carries many risks and distortions in our own experience, be they personal or communitary, of the ministry that the Church has entrusted to us. We are, as firmly emphasized by the Second Vatican Council, the People of God, whose identity is “the dignity and freedom of the sons of God, in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells as in His temple” (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 9). The faithful Holy People of God is anointed with the grace of the Holy Spirit, and thus, as we reflect, think, evaluate, discern, we must be very attentive to this anointing’.

In the people of God we are lay people *who encountered a person after our encounter with Christ. I am referring here to the encounter with a great saint: Camillus de Lellis* whom we met through his life which, from a certain point onwards, was totally spent in giving himself to the sick. He welcomed this ‘insight’ which was a gift of the Holy Spirit, *the charism of mercy, the love and tenderness of the Lord towards the sick.* At a certain point in his life, Camillus knew how ‘to see’ the sick people of Rome who had been abandoned and he took responsibility for them, to help them and care for them ‘as a mother cares for her sick only child’. Through his conversion, his life was transformed by love.

In a biography of our saint, Germana Sommaruga wrote: ‘The spirit of Camillus was truly open in all ways, like Christ and in communion with him, to the little ones of this world, to all those in whom the mystery of the passion of Christ continues to take place. In them, Camillus saw Christ and he served him; amongst them he lived the Gospel. Amongst them, he felt called to make present the goodness and the mercy of God. To each one of them he expressed, through his approach, his yearning for justice and charity, helping all of them to discover in Christ the meaning of life, of suffering and of death, bringing to hospitals a message of love and hope’.

He lived what the Gospel proclaims in Matthew chapter 25, ‘I was sick and you visited me’, with a style that was born from the heart, from the mercy and from the tenderness that is expressed by the heart of a mother towards her sick only child. Indeed, St. Camillus said to his religious: ‘Each religious should ask the Lord for the grace of maternal affection towards his neighbour, so as to be able to serve him with all charity, in soul and body: because we wish – with the grace of God – to serve all the sick with that affection with which a loving mother cares for her sick only child.

This is our principal goal: to care for them even if they are plague-stricken, in soul and body, with the special fervour of charity’.

And it was this caring for the sick even if they are infectious, caring for them if this endangers one’s own life, that would be the fourth vow of the Camillian religious.

In Camillus the Holy Spirit brought forth a special gift so that he would not be alone in providing service in this ‘great sea of charity’. This gift was the *charism*, the specific charism of the Ministers of the Sick, which is recognised by the Church as the ‘work of the Holy Spirit’ and is an evangelical journey towards holiness.

Indeed, ‘the charism of a founder or foundress is revealed as an experience of the spirit transmitted to his or her disciples so that it can be lived, stewarded, deepened and constantly developed by them in harmony with the Body of Christ, in perennial growth’.

St. Camillus gathered around him ‘pious and good men’ who would give their lives to the Lord in service, in the Church, for the sick and above all the poorest of the sick; who would exercise their ministry in hospitals, in health-care institutions and in private homes through ‘*complete*’ service to the sick. Perhaps we have still not made people aware of this ‘complete’ service...or we have somewhat put it to one side and forgotten about it...but we must serve the ‘whole’ man and the ‘whole’ woman in their corporal selves which is the dwelling place of their spirituality.

Thirst, hunger, pain, physical decline, the perception of need, and the fear of death are part of the experience of a person, a person who becomes a ‘*setting for the revelation of the face of God*’.

Camillus is recognised as a great reformer of health care, and the Church in 1746 proclaimed him the ‘initiator of a new school of charity’. Through his activity he revolutionised the health care of his time, taking care of sick people in their totality; he began a new way of living the commandment of love for the suffering and the sick.

He founded a religious Order, the ‘Ministers of the Sick’, thinking at the beginning of his journey of a ‘company of pious and good men who, not for gain but voluntarily and for love of God, would serve the sick with that charity and lovingness that mothers usually have towards their own sick children’.

The Lay Camillian Family: the gift that the Lord gave to Camillus with the charism and the spirituality that began with him has not come to an end. His charism has spread, it has animated men and women down the centuries, and it is alive in the world because the Lord is faithful, he does not take back his gift, and he entrusts it to those who journey in time and in the centuries following in the footsteps of the merciful Jesus. The charism of mercy towards the suffering continues to live today as well, in the

history of today, in the hearts and the lives of those who are called to live following the Lord Jesus with faithfulness: men and women religious, consecrated and lay people. The Lord has entrusted this to us as well, today, in this historical epoch.

The gift of encountering, welcoming and living in their own lives the charism and the spirituality of St. Camillus is also given to the lay faithful. From the heart of Camillus, like a great tree, have grown other 'branches' of religious and lay people alike who offer their lives as a gift in generous service to the sick. With the specific style of lay people, according to the words of the Gospel, to be 'salt' and 'yeast in the dough'. This means that first and foremost we are asked to have taste to make the bread good. Neither the salt nor the yeast are seen, but they are there and they make food good.

When preparing myself for this international meeting of the Lay Camillian Family, as for that matter has happened to me on other occasions, a thought arose in my mind: how is it possible to speak about, and to present, the lay vocation lived in Camillian spirituality to so many people from different countries and with different cultures and ecclesial and social experiences? Which is the language that enables us to communicate with each other, to share our journey in service, and even more to relate to each other?

My thoughts immediately went to that passage from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 2, 1-12: '1. When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. 2. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. 3. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. 4. And they were all filled with the holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim. 5. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven staying in Jerusalem. 6. At this sound, they gathered in a large crowd, but they were confused because each one heard them speaking in his own language. 7. They were astounded, and in amazement they asked, "Are not all these people who are speaking Galileans? 8. Then how does each of us hear them in his own native language? 9. We are Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10. Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya near Cyrene, as well as travelers from Rome, 11. Both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arabs, yet we hear them speaking in our own tongues of the mighty acts of God." 12. They were all astounded and bewildered, and said to one another, "What does this mean?"

It seems to me that only if we speak this language, which is the language of love, which comes from God and speaks to the heart of each one of us, will we have the only pathway that exists for mutual comprehension, respecting our diversities, accepting each other mutually, with an open gaze directed towards the journey that we are on.

During these days of our meeting we will listen to very many experiences, we will have joyous meetings with people that we have already met or whom we will meet on this occasion, sharing moments of prayer and dialogue: we will try, that is to say, to ‘construct relationships that are as fraternal as possible’. After this beautiful and rich experience is finished, however, we must do everything possible to communicate with our local groups, bringing back to our daily experience what we have experienced during these days so that the nourishment we have received is shared and increases our lives and commitment, as well as that of our friends who are next to us.

We should do this so that this meeting does not remain an isolated fact that occurred only once, a fine experience but one of its kind, almost ‘framed’ by those who took part in it, but, instead, a meeting that increases the lives of each member of the Lay Camillian Family with a positive experience, nurtures a ‘sense of belonging’ to this great ‘spiritual Family’, and restores impetus and commitment to service and to readiness to help the suffering.

The need for formation is expressed clearly in the *statutes of the Lay Camillian Family* and we are convinced of this need. We need, from the beginning of the journey of formation, to explore the Word of God, in particular the Gospel, to know about the LCF, its history and its statutes. We need to explore through periodic meetings what the Lay Camillian Family offers and proposes to its members, knowledge about St. Camillus, formation as regards relationships that provide help, listening etc.

Formation is indispensable in the lives of each member of the LCF.

It is important for us to cultivate formation in the groups to which we belong through community and personal meetings in order to foster awareness of what we are, of the gifts that we have received, of the journey we are engaged in, and of the service that is asked of us: all of this in order to be faithful to our vocation.

Meetings, dialogue and an exchange of experiences at the side of the sick increases and nurtures fraternity in the Lay Camillian Family. We thus manage to offer listening, help and support if, and when, someone amongst us experiences situations and moments of hardship and difficulty. We feel in this way that we are on a journey of seeking to be credible witnesses to the Gospel.

The Church has recognised that the LCF is a ‘specific work’ of the Order of Camillians. In this, as well, on both sides, we must help each other to grow in knowing each other, in fraternity and in spiritual help.

Formation is indispensable:

– To say what we are, our vocational identity, in the Church, in the people of God, Camillian lay people taking part and involved in the communities to which we belong for the cause of justice; supportive above all of those who are most frail because they are sick, without care and treatment.

– To persevere in our vocation, in faithfulness, harmonising faith and life, our faith which we express in deeds, in words, in service and in the signs of daily life.

Ongoing formation helps us:

– To live Camillian evangelical spirituality in our daily lives, meeting the Lord in history and daily events, with a reading according to the Gospel of human history, on the pathway of lay sanctification.

– To discern the ‘signs of the times’ by discovering the presence of God in history, in people, in events; looking at the world with the eyes of faith and hope.

– To cultivate personal and communal prayer, which is the indispensable nourishment for life; prayer, the frequent celebration of the sacraments, is the spring from which we draw strength and perseverance; prayer is a halt when we need relief as well, it is a journey of life.

– To live ‘mission’ towards, and at the side of, every suffering person, wherever we encounter them, with any kind of suffering, embodying the specific spirituality of the Camillians in our lives: ‘Go and do likewise’.

– To work for justice and peace in a world that is so lacerated by divisions, by wars, by forms of intolerance, which are the cause of so much suffering for our brothers and sisters; being committed to this as a practical way of implementing the commandment of love.

One could say many other things but I will stop here, and I entrust to the thought of each one of you, and together with the people of the group to which you belong, the task of continuing and exploring these few and simple points that I have offered you in order to keep us faithful to our vocation.

Specifically when thinking of this Camillian style of being a ‘neighbour’ to the sick and the suffering, and especially to the poor, to those who live in loneliness, some questions emerge in me that I will now share with you:

- *How would Camillus live his life today? Whither and towards whom would his gaze and his heart be directed?*
- *'Today' what does his message say to me, living as I do in this world, and to each one of us in our own realities? What does he ask of me?*
- *Is there still a need, here and today, for people who 'voluntarily and for love of God...?'*
- *What activity does this world, this 'great sea' with all of its needs, expect from us, the Church, the people of God?*

I will leave these open questions to you.

And to end my paper I will entrust to you a message of Pope Benedict XVI. At 28b of *Deus caritas est* he writes: '*b) Love—caritas—will always prove necessary, even in the most just society. There is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love. Whoever wants to eliminate love is preparing to eliminate man as such. There will always be suffering which cries out for consolation and help. There will always be loneliness. There will always be situations of material need where help in the form of concrete love of neighbour is indispensable*'

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