



**"Let yourself be transformed"
...in the vision and appreciation of the laity: "One in Christ Jesus"**

(M^a Ángeles López Romero¹)

People who occupy positions of responsibility in religious institutions for a long time (which I have been experiencing first hand for twenty-five years now) are often confused with the consecrated persons, and often this mistake needs to be corrected. This means that, at least looking at it from the outside, the "lay style" of carrying out our tasks does not differ too much from that of those who have made the choice to commit their whole life to the charism of their own congregation. Not so much, however, as to question our presence in such a space.

At the same time, the institutions or people who from within make the decision to place their trust in the laity must justify this choice to their internal and external interlocutors. Sometimes they even see themselves forced to "disguise" the position in order to give the feeling of not having given more responsibility than they really had. Why this? Simply and clearly because by default religious institutions often doubt the commitment of the laity, their ability to identify with both the charism of the Congregation and the original motivation of that institution. In practice, it is assumed that we lay people are only transitory or that we are there merely for economic interests. And perhaps also because giving responsibility to a person considered a "stranger" seems a betrayal of one's own institution and of its safety. But none of this is really sure. Or it is certainly not in most cases.

We lay people who work for religious institutions such as the Society of St. Paul find ourselves subject to the same doubts, the same uncertainties, tensions and aspirations of the religious people. The same ones. And our commitment is more or less the same because we all participate in the same limitations of our common human condition. We are all subjected to the harsh pressures of a society and a time in which the fragility of life-long enduring stakes and the volatility of relationships prevail, as the philosopher Zygmunt Bauman foretold so well. So much so that among lay people and religious people alike, there are often desertions, which evidently cause frustration and disappointment. However, there are also numerous examples of commitment and fidelity that, in our case, have to coexist with the vicissitudes of one's own family.

A good part of us lay people continue to sail in a boat that has to face a threatening storm, since we share the same evangelical commitment born from our faith in the God of Jesus of Nazareth,

¹ Editor of *San Paolo Spagna* from 2017

and from the same desire to bring to all men and women today the hope of the Good News, that Christ lives and that love conquers death.

However, while I share all this, if I am allowed to be fully sincere, I will say that we frequently feel that we are subjected to a very demanding test. We are permanently evaluated on the quality of our commitment and the fidelity of our identification with the charism of the Congregation and its evangelizing mission. Or else we feel reduced to the condition of being passing visitors, who do not get to arouse too much interest in being known - and therefore respected - throughout. And this happens fundamentally because, as I said above, we are considered an alien, unknown element, and therefore susceptible to being harmful, instead of an added element, sometimes even vital, of the mystical body constituted by a religious community, which, like the Church itself, aspires to be Catholic in the most literal sense of the term.

How can all this change? What should be done? Beginning with establishing a relationship based on horizontality: we are all equal, same children of God, companions in the common task entrusted to us. Let us treat ourselves as such.

Only from this horizontal point of view, which does not establish hierarchies or look down on the lay state from above, will we be able to make right contact, to know each other better and respect each other as human beings and professionals, esteeming and valuing our respective talents and the different contributions we can make in our common work.

Let's know each other more and better, therefore, starting from a sincere and fruitful interest in each other, and not from an assessment that tastes like a threat and that comes from distrust.

Together with this horizontal view and the respect that derives from it, I would also dare to suggest a change in the principles that govern vertical relationships in the Congregation. A change well illustrated by the Magisterium of Pope Francis, which recommends establishing synodal relations within the Church and respect for the principle of subsidiarity when conferring responsibilities. These principles of synodality and subsidiarity are perhaps already accepted in a theoretical form in the Constitutions and other Pauline documents--as is the case with collaboration with the laity and the progressive incorporation of women-- but are not always applied or are not applied to the necessary and right extent, so that the Society of St. Paul may adapt to the dynamics of our time and interpret the signs of the times, as the Second Vatican Council recommended at the time.

Only in this way, even in the diversity of charisms, will we constitute a true community of equals such as to be able to contribute to "bringing the Word to the men and women of today by today's means", as Fr. Alberione wanted and asked us in his time. Otherwise, we will find ourselves missing a historical opportunity, renouncing effectiveness in our work, thus failing to take up the message of the Gospel.

In fact, just as "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female", we should no longer even distinguish between lay and religious in carrying out our mission, but be truly "one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28-29).