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THE STARTING POINT

At a time when relativism has confused things, including in the experience of many Christians, it is appropriate to state that:

if the vital setting of the **Catholic priest's** call is *the sanctuary*, then the privileged point from which to begin to proclaim the Kingdom is the *pulpit*, and the available toolbox is *sanctification and government*;

if the vital setting of the call for the **consecrated Catholic** is *the enclosed garden*, the privileged point from which to begin to proclaim the Kingdom is *anticipation*, and the available toolbox is the *radical approach of the Gospel*;

the vital setting for the vocation of the lay Catholic is the 'profane' understood in the strict sense of the term: what lies outside the temple/church, *pro* = ante *fanum* = temple or church [the lay space, *espace du profan*, *espacio del laico*, *espaço do leigo*]:

- ✓ the privileged place from which to begin to proclaim the Kingdom is the *sharing of solidarity* [sharing of solidarity, *partage solidaire*, *compartir solidario*, *partilha solidária*]
- ✓ and the available toolbox is *professionalism* [professionalism, *professionnalisme*, *profesionalidad*, *profissionalidade*].

A FIRST GREAT CONSEQUENCE

The *profane*, as the lay Catholic's vital habitat, cannot be looked upon as if we are **tourists** observing it, **travellers** passing through it casually and always fleetingly, nostalgic **guests** from elsewhere ready to return home, **prisoners** uncomfortably and passively locked up in it, or clever **terrorists** doing everything to blow it up. Jesus' indication that the disciples are in the world but not of the world (cf. Jn. 2) does not refer to *the profane*, but **to the evil mentality that transforms what is outside the temple/church into what is against it, distorting the order of creation.**

Therefore, *the profane*, as our natural and innate habitat, must see us as its inhabitants - with an especially strong and convinced characteristic: **we are in it with love.**

The **Second Vatican Council** translates and summarises this attitude with the opening phrase of the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*: "*The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age ... Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. Gaudium et spes, luctus et angor hominum ... nihilque vere humanum invenitur, quod in corde eorum non resonet."*

Traditional **ecclesial activity** describes it with the term *pastoral charity*, that is, the praise of the shepherd who loves his sheep: he guards them, stays with them, knows them, makes them grow, cares for them, engages with them.

Salesian spirituality gives this depth in three specific ways:

- *style of presence* (willingness to be in the profane by getting involved, like educators with young people), which is the implementation of the *preventive system*;
- “*strive to make yourself loved*” (commitment to be loving, attractive, not repellent), which is the secret of the love typical of the Salesian charism;
- “*love what they [the profane] love, so that they may love what you love*” (paraphrasing Don Bosco), which is the *educational* perspective proper to the spiritual and pastoral experience of the Salesians.

THE NEED FOR “CONSISTENCY”

But, careful, *the profane* needs to be treated *consistently* and must be experienced and brought alive with its own tools. Otherwise it is disfigured. We shouldn't use a carpenter's or workshop tools in the kitchen to cook but pots, ladles and dishes. Our role as lay people must empower us to show how a pot – while remaining a pot – does not exhaust its purpose in simply allowing food to cook: more and better things can be done with it.

If we treat *the profane* with “other” tools, we degrade it. On the other hand, by using it for what it is, we can also bring out what *is beyond* appearances, enhance it.

The lay Catholic is not **subversive** (upending and unravelling things by breaking them) who disfigures *the profane* by confusing it with the “den of the Evil One”, but is '**eversive**' (bringing to the surface what is in the depths, like the plough when it turns over clods of earth) recognising the profane as a *place of grace* and bringing its roots and generativity to light.

This is the profound meaning of the lay Catholic's *professionalism*, this individual's expertise, challenge, the lay person's “pulpit”. This professionalism must take place above all within three areas: social relationships, professions (even seemingly marginal ones), cultural debate.

In all, but especially in the last of these, what is needed is not so much *to foster dialogue as to allow us to become the topic of dialogue*, or to expose ourselves to “*the reason for the hope that is in you*”.

In such a highly heterogeneous and unstable setting the role of the lay Catholic cannot be limited to the “crusader” who wields non-negotiable values, but should take on the role of the “**mestizo**” [crossbreed, *mêtissage*, *mestizaje*, *miscigenação*] who is extremely patient and persevering in getting people to see that the values of the Good News are important for everyone.

EVERYTHING CONTRIBUTES TO THE GOAL

There are no neutral areas in *the profane* where the disciple's objective is concerned – **encountering Jesus**. Each and every element of the profane is a moment of encounter. And these moments are so not because we charge them with religious meta-significance, but because they are so in their own right, by virtue of creation. Living the conjugal relationship as an encounter with Christ, for example – even in physical terms – or engaging in our profession ethically and with care, or dealing with people who quite openly think differently from the Gospel: all this profoundly changes how the lay person is and acts.

We definitely must avoid the temptation *to clericalise the laity*, all the more so if worldly matters are involved, because this takes us away from our vocation and from an essential task of the Church's mission.

Let us recall what *Lumen Gentium* wrote in no. 33, taking up Pius XI's *Quadragesimo anno*: “*the laity are called in a special way to make the Church present and operative in those places and circumstances where only through them can it become the salt of the earth* . This is about family life, work, school, administration, economics, culture, technology, science. They are places of private life and work.

It is social relationships in the strict sense. Lay Christians are 'lay' insofar as they *are within* the various elements of profane life and live them to the end.

THE CURRENT MEETING POINTS FOR BEING KINGDOM WORKERS

So, rather than being sent into the world to establish the Kingdom where it did not exist, as if it were a conquest and we were *unskilled workers in the Kingdom*, instead we are **planted** in the temporal order as skilled *Kingdom workers* whose task is not so much to bring new things in from outside but to reveal them by pulling them out of the very soil we stand on. We are *witnesses of truth (adtestator veritatis)*. This truth, today in particular, seems to pass through some urgent **central meeting points** we need to deal with:

1. **bringing out a human and fraternal community** in our own little area through constant mutual listening, debate (a serious way of understanding *synodality*), the primacy of relationships, a sense of wise openness, cultivating what is genuinely *human* in the first place. This is the typically secular frontier of the precept of charity to which we are called. It is the junction where the Salesian Family can bring more resources taken from the inspiration of St Francis de Sales and the spirituality of Don Bosco;
2. **giving work back its generative sense** (inner and not only material) by focusing on the four adjectives that the Social Doctrine of the Church highlights as evangelical and essential and true paths of meaning: "free, creative, participatory and supportive". But also focusing on the centrality of promoting and defending work as an element of humanisation; focusing on the ability to train and accompany the very young in work as well as those eternally excluded from this circuit; and focusing on freeing work from the clutches of the *economy alone* to return it to the dimension of development of the individual;
3. **never again being alienated from civil involvement** in the **management of public affairs** and **building up the common good**, leaving behind the preconception that, especially in the West, has blocked the laity from political involvement, and instead taking the **duty of politics** (in all its various forms) seriously and profoundly as an essential element of the lay vocation that cannot be omitted;
4. **engaging systematically in expanding the gift economy** that generates bonds (community) between people and territories, between the market and the society, between institutions and groups, between societies in the north and those in the south of the world;
5. **making the perspective of integral ecology** our own as a way that allows the truth of the gift given to us in creation to emerge. So the current focus on ecological transition is not superficial cheap environmentalism or environmentalism at any cost, but correcting the relationship between creatures, which implies a change of personal mentality before choices of direction at the general level.

IN CONCLUSION

Lay Christians guided by Salesian spirituality are particularly called to *be fully* part of this understanding, to be involved (which means *committing themselves together*, similar to the term solidarity) with and *for the profane*.

Being involved necessarily brings the issue of **contamination** with it. We thank God for the good kind of contamination (that results in growth). For the bad kind (which destroys) it is essential to rebuild *areas of community discernment* without which the action of lay people outside the temple/church risks being a game of "one against all". The Salesian Family is also this, but it must be more deeply appreciated, willed, organised, brought into action.