

Laity: collaborators in the mission and involvement in the local Church

PART I: Collaborators in the mission.

1st question: which mission?

Answer: Missio Dei

2nd question: at what level of collaboration?

Answer: Full level from the baptismal vocation

PART II: Commitment in the local Church

3rd question: How to encourage this participation in the local Churches?

Answer: Invest in the training of the laity; Review the formation of the clergy; Have concrete network experiences – walking together, in synodality.

1. Collaborators in which mission?

Perhaps when we think of the theme of the laity as collaborators in the mission, it almost naturally comes to mind that they collaborate in "our" mission, in "our" works. We are therefore happy to see that, in fact, many of them occupy important positions and functions today in our schools, universities, hospitals, social centers, retreat houses, parishes, etc. And, although this could be considered an advance in the relationships between the different "states of life" within the Church (lay, religious, ordained minister), in reality it still reflects a pyramid mentality, which places the non-ordained and the non-consecrated base of the pyramid that makes decisions and determines the direction of the mission, which remains primarily "ours", leaving us to direct them and them to collaborate.

I think that the transition from this paradigm to that of a more circular (and non-pyramidal) Church begins when we realize that, in no way, can the mission we carry out be labeled as "ours", since it is the Lord who chooses us and he sends us to collaborate in his mission, that is, it is the Missio Dei! As we know, this ancient Latin term means "Mission of God" or "Sending of God", in allusion to God's great mission to restore humanity to Himself through the incarnation and sending of His Son Jesus and His calling to us, to participate in his mission.

Indeed, this language has helped us, in the sphere of religious life, to overcome distances and to create a greater awareness of the body and of the apostolic network, which includes all those who are involved in the same mission. Thus, in the last General Congregation of the Jesuits, for example, the final document invites "the Superiors and Directors of the work, as

well as all Jesuits and collaborators in the mission, to promote profound habits of prayer and discernment as a prelude and accompaniment to continuous planning, but also to strengthen mutual relationships and collaboration in the implementation of plans. It means cultivating a spirit of openness and trust among ourselves and with all those who serve the *Missio Dei*” (GC d.2,26). It can be seen that we no longer speak of collaborators for "our mission", since today we understand more clearly that it is a matter of "collaboration with others", in a "participation in the mission which includes those who profess the Christian faith like us, the members to different religions, women and men of good will who, like us, wish to collaborate in the reconciling work of Christ. In the words of Father General Arturo Sosa, Jesuits are called 'to the mission of Christ, which does not belong exclusively to us, but which we share with many men and women consecrated to the service of others” (GC36 d.1, 36).

Naturally, all this takes time and a desire for conversion to become a reality, because, as the Jesuits acknowledge, “despite the remarkable progress in collaboration within the Society, obstacles continue to exist. The challenges lie in our lack of imagination and courage; or they can come from inhibitions deriving from our social contexts or even from localized habitual practices of clericalism” (GC36 d.2,7).

2. At what level of collaboration?

In addition to consecrated men and/or ordained ministers, lay men and women also participate fully as collaborators in Christ's mission, through the sacrament of Baptism, which makes us all disciples and missionaries, as Pope Benedict XVI recalled in Aparecida, in his speech inauguration of that V Conference of the Latin American Episcopate, when he said that one of the objectives of that meeting was "to remind the faithful of this Continent as well that, by virtue of their Baptism, they are called to be disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ" .

But, even before that moment and with universal scope, the Second Vatican Council confirmed the vision of the Church as People of God, as we see in *Lumen gentium*, which in its first three chapters deals with the mystery of the Church, of the Church as People of God and of the hierarchical constitution of the Church and in particular of the episcopate, which is inserted and understood in the entire People of God, thus highlighting the complementary relationship between the baptismal priesthood, common to all, and the ministerial priesthood, of ordained ministers . This confirms that, although only a few exercise the service of authority, all in the Church fully exercise the service of collaboration in Christ's mission. Indeed, the entire IV chapter of this conciliar constitution is dedicated to describing the role of the laity in the ecclesiastical structure and their mission in the Church, highlighting our common identity as Christians, given by Baptism.

Now, this full participation of the laity, and especially of women, in the mission of Christ and his Church, is taken up again today by Pope Francis, who departs from the same vision of Vatican II to insist on the fact that this participation arises from a requirement of our faith, as he did in his inaugural speech for the beginning of the new synodal journey, on October 9, 2021:

In fact - as the Apostle Paul says - "by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Cor 12:13). The starting point, in the ecclesial body, is this and nothing else: Baptism. From him,

our source of life, derives the equal dignity of the children of God, despite the diversity of ministries and charisms. For this reason we are all called to participate in the life of the Church and in her mission. If there is no real participation of the entire People of God, talks about communion risk becoming nothing more than pious intentions. In this regard, some progress has been made, but a certain difficulty is still felt and we must register the unease and tribulation of many pastoral workers, of the participating organizations of the dioceses and parishes, of the women who are often still left out. Everyone to participate: it is an irrevocable ecclesial commitment! For all the baptized this is the identity card: Baptism.

Fortunately, despite the resistance of some internal sectors of the hierarchical Church and of some neo-conservative and anti-Vatican II groups, Francis' commitment to fight clericalism and give more space to the participation of the laity, with an emphasis on female participation, has found a positive echo and proactive feedback in various parts of the world, such as the Pan-Amazon region, where work is currently underway to put into practice the proposals approved at the Special Synod on the Amazon, which states in its Final Document:

The renewal of the Second Vatican Council places the laity within the People of God, in an entirely ministerial Church, which has in the sacrament of Baptism the foundation of the identity and mission of every Christian. The laity are the faithful who, through Baptism, have been incorporated into Christ, constituted in the People of God and, in their own way, made sharers in the priestly, prophetic and royal munus of Christ, thus exercising their role in the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world (see LG 31). From this triple relationship, with Christ, with the Church and with the world, the vocation and mission of the laity are born. The Church in the Amazon, in view of a fair and supportive society in the care of the "common home", wants to make the laity privileged actors. Her action was and is vital, both in the coordination of ecclesial communities, in the exercise of ministries, and in her prophetic commitment to a world inclusive of all, which has in its martyrs a challenging witness.

3. How can this participation be encouraged in the local Churches?

After reflecting on the mission we carry out as *Missio Dei* and that, within it, the collaboration of lay men and women must be full and legitimate, starting from the common identity given by Baptism, we can conclude this brief exposition by asking ourselves what we can and must do more to encourage and strengthen the participation of the laity, not only in the execution of our apostolic projects, but also in the processes of elaboration of the same and in decision-making areas.

Certainly, we all know initiatives that go in that direction, at different levels: from the most universal to the most localized in our geographical, ecclesial and congregational realities. The sharing of some experiences reserved for this afternoon will be a rich moment to apply the theoretical discourse we have made so far.

However, I would like to highlight some lines of pastoral action that seem to me important for fostering this greater participation of our lay brothers in Christ's mission, in which we are all collaborators. For this I turn once again to the reality that I know most closely, that is, that of the Pan-Amazonian Church, for being my region of origin and for having worked there for many years, being up to now a collaborator in the mission they carry out there. Alongside

this, I think it could also be useful to share my experience of collaboration at this moment with the spirituality team of the next Synod on synodality, which certainly sheds a lot of light on the issue we are addressing.

A first aspect to highlight is the importance of investing in the formation of our lay animators, so that they can fully exercise their fundamental vocation as collaborators in Christ's mission with us, priests and religious, who have already ensured a long formation process. Pope Francis himself, in fact, in the apostolic exhortation "Querida Amazônia" underlines that it is important that the laity assume important responsibilities for the growth of the Amazonian communities, many of which lack the regular presence of the priestly figure and also of the consecrated life. But, underlines the Pope, for our lay people to be able to act in the exercise of leadership in these communities, adequate accompaniment is necessary, that is, that they be offered a solid formation. In this sense, Francis takes up what has already been proposed by the Final Document of the Amazon Synod, when he recommends the creation of training programs in theology that are inculturated and include joint training for lay ministries and the training of priests. It is not simply a question of copying and offering the laity the same models of formation in the clerical style or of consecrated life, but creatively trying to ensure our lay leaders, as the Pope says, «maturation in holiness through various lay services, which presuppose a process of maturation - biblical, doctrinal, spiritual and practical - and various paths of ongoing formation", thus allowing the Amazonian communities to have a "stable presence of lay leaders, mature and endowed with authority, who know the languages, cultures, spiritual experience and the way of living in community in every place, leaving room for the multiplicity of gifts that the Holy Spirit sows in everyone” .

On the importance of the formation of lay collaborators in the mission of the Church (*Missio Dei*), the Latin American bishops gathered in Aparecida recognized "the witness and solidarity of lay men and women, ever more interested in their theological formation, as true missionaries of charity, and work to effectively transform the world according to Christ". One wonders, however, whether, from then up to the present day, there has really been progress in investing resources for the formation of lay people in our local churches and religious congregations.

In the field of formation, one cannot fail to mention, as of fundamental importance for building a greater role of the laity as collaborators in Christ's mission, the attention that must be paid to priestly formation, so that, from the outset, young seminarians and future priests learn to work in collaboration with the other living forces of the Church, such as the laity and the consecrated life. Well, one of the great obstacles for us to have more initiatives for the participation of the laity (and, in some places, also of the consecrated) at the forefront of parish ministry or in others is the predominant clericalism, which, according to Pope Francis, is directly linked to the attachment to power, being a real perversion that ends up infecting others, because "clericalism, which is not only of clerics, is a behavior that concerns us all: clericalism is a perversion of the Church" . It is therefore necessary to foster, right from initial formation, concrete experiences for future priests of working in a network, so that they may learn to walk together, in synodality.

With the word synodality we then come to the last aspect that I would like to highlight in order to encourage the collaboration and involvement of the laity in the mission that we are

all called to carry out today, not only inside but above all outside the walls of the Church, as a true "Church in exit". The theme of synodality, in fact, has already been present in the recent synods convoked by the Pope. If we want to understand the spirit of synodality that moves the steps of the Church today, we must keep in mind the whole journey covered since the realization of the Second Vatican Council, the institution of the Synod of Bishops by Pope Paul VI, up to the recent synods led by the current Pope, since more and more from one synod to another we see that Francis has no doubts that "the path of synodality is the path that God expects from the Church of the Third Millennium", being a "constitutive dimension of the Church", so that "what the Lord asks of us, in a certain sense, is already contained in the word 'synod'".

For example, at the Synod on "The pastoral challenges of the family in the context of evangelization", in 2014, Francis realized that, methodologically, in order to debate such an important and complex topic, it was necessary and urgent to listen, above all to the voice of laity, thus establishing a long preparatory dynamic, with two pre-synodal meetings with wide participation, which thus matured the reflection and prepared the path that culminated in the assembly. Likewise, in the Synod on "Young people, faith and vocational discernment", in 2018, it is possible to note an expansion of the listening modality, which determined a greater space for a very broad individual participation at a distance, in the preparatory phase of the Assembly, and also in this one, there was a more significant representation of auditors, guests and experts, thus favoring that the theme of young people was addressed in a more lively way during the synodal assembly.

But, undoubtedly, it was in the Synod on the Amazon, with the theme "The Amazon: new paths for the Church and for an integral ecology", that we found the most important methodological essay in terms of progress in synodality, where the two previous synodal experiences (Family and Youth) found a point of convergence and where some structural changes began to take hold with greater force, based on a large presence of the People of God throughout the synodal process, methodologically characterized by listening concrete and inclusive, especially of native leaders, women, guests of other international organizations or other Christian denominations, etc.

Synodality is not the object of our reflection at this moment, but its importance for the Church indicates the need to broaden the range of apostolic experiences that help Christians to increasingly know how to work together, in the diversity of charisms and ministries, through the building the kingdom of God, valuing moments of listening, dialogue and common discernment, in a process in which everyone feels included as baptized and, ultimately, as people loved by God.