International Community of the Divine Savior
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Have we fallen out of the times? – Why do we need Lay Salvatorians?

When people talk about laypeople today, they are often equated with the 'uninformed'. It implies that such people are 'not experts' and, taking this line of thought further, that they might be better off keeping their hands off a subject they know nothing about. This is because the word 'laicus' acquired the secondary meaning of 'uneducated' in medieval Latin. This was because, until the Renaissance, members of non-wealthy families could only obtain an education through a clerical career.

The term 'layperson' derives from the Greek word 'laós', which means 'people'. A layperson is therefore someone who belongs to the people. In biblical thought, the word 'laós' carries a highly positive connotation. In all theologically significant passages, it does not refer to ordinary people, or even to the primitive masses in contrast to their leaders, but to the chosen people, the people of God. There is only one people, one laós; alongside it stand the éthne, the pagan nations – and in the Old Testament, Israel is the people par excellence.

In the New Testament, too, those who belong to God - those who believe in Christ - are referred to as laós. However, our term 'layperson' is not derived directly from laós, but from the adjective 'laikós' ... 'belonging to the people'. This term encompasses things and people that have no connection with worship. Laikós refers to the rural population, as opposed to the ruling circles in the city. This term laikós, from which our word 'layperson' is derived, is not used in the New Testament. The idea of an internal distinction within the Church between a ruling class responsible for worship and the broad masses of ordinary people who have no access to it is incompatible with the image of the Church as presented in the New Testament. Rather, the principle here is that all are "brothers and sisters".

The Second Vatican Council also takes up this point when it states in the document ***Lumen Gentium*** that it is the People of God to which all people are called.[1] This People of God has both feet firmly planted in the midst of life, with all its everyday challenges. The laity are the true experts in everyday life, for through their experiences they are called to speak of their faith and hope and to invite others [2].

So, as lay people, we need not hide or even step back. No, on the contrary, it is our duty to bear witness to our faith, our hope and our confidence in our daily lives. And as Blessed Francis once remarked, God often chooses the people who seem least suited for his tasks. This should give each and every one of us the courage to trust in our own talents (the 'tools' we were born with and have acquired) and to use them appropriately.

1 ⟶ cf. Lumen Gentium Chapter II, 13 and IV, 31

2 → Bishop Renz in a speech marking the 20th anniversary of the Lay Salvatorians in Bad Wurzach.

So why do we need Lay Salvatorians?

As mentioned above, every baptised Christian is, in principle, called to be an apostle in today's world and to proclaim the Gospel in their own way, using their talents. The Second Vatican Council opened doors and pointed out paths for this[3]. Yet only a few people have the courage, the ambition or – quite simply – feel a genuine calling to do so. If we look around, we see that people's religiosity has all but vanished from everyday life in our society today. There are many reasons for this. One of them is that religious education tends to end with Confirmation, which means that a truly mature faith life is rarely developed. That is why only a few people now set out to delve deeper into the realm of religion.

This development is nothing new. It was already foreseeable in the 19th century, when the Church lost many members, particularly among the working classes, who often suffered from extremely precarious working and living conditions. Although the Church's deepest calling was to stand up for the poor and the needy, it failed to build the necessary bridges in time. In many cases, its self-image as a power factor in the negative sense had grown too large to provide the right answers to the New Age. It became apparent that modern life was no longer in harmony with the traditional 'God-given' order – science and technology brought to light a new, different picture of our world. Johann Baptist Jordan had become all too familiar with this spreading spiritual distress, impoverishment and turning away from the Church during his years of wandering and whilst working on the railway. So for him, the question was almost self-evident: how could one bring God's love back to people when everything was changing so rapidly and the old values no longer held sway? How to give them an answer when they were seeking God in this changed world. Two things seemed particularly essential to him in this regard:

- "The Work" (as he called his endeavour) had to be comprehensive and should not be confined to any particular field, for the questions and challenges of life are becoming ever more diverse for people;
- and lay people must be actively involved in this, for only they are able to reach out to people in places where they would not expect to encounter a 'pastoral carer' in the traditional sense.

Father Bonaventura Lüthen, a close companion and confidant of Blessed Francis, summed up Father Jordan's programme succinctly in June 1882:

> *"The pastor in the pulpit, in the confessional, at the altar is no longer enough; we must have lay pastors who, from the great pulpit of the world, teach and defend the Gospel through word and deed, through their actions and conduct."*

If we look back at the original idea of Blessed Francis, the Apostolic Society with its three degrees, we can see that lay people were involved in every aspect of it. It was therefore quite clear to him that lay people were not to be second-class religious or merely a substitute for them. Rather, the intention was always to work together as equals – broad-based teamwork. Unfortunately, however, the spirit of the times back then was still far from allowing such ideas. Priests and unmarried men (brothers) who wished to live in a community had to do so according to a rule of life and thus join together to form a religious institute[4]. The same was true of the women who had joined Fr Jordan they eventually went on to form the Salvatorian Sisters, with their own rule of life. Yes – and the laity – they were left by the wayside, for there was certainly no place for them in a thoroughly clerical Church. But the world keeps turning and times are changing – even within the Church!

3 → cf. Apostolicam actuositatem – Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity

4 - without clear standards, church approval would not have been possible, and this remains the case today!

A fresh start …

The period following the Second Vatican Council was a time of new beginnings—but also of upheaval. At that time, several members of the North American Province—both priests and sisters—left their communities. Some of them even got married, but did not want to sever ties with the Salvatorian community, as it had also become a family to them. On the one hand, this was a major challenge for both sides, but at the same time, it served as an impetus to reflect more deeply on the founder's original vision. This gave rise to the so-called "Associates." In Brazil and Austria, this idea was adopted in the mid-1980s. Austria was an exception here, as the initiative did not come from the priests or sisters, but from the laity themselves. Interestingly, at the same time, a so-called "ad hoc" commission of priests and sisters was preparing a document regarding possible "rules of life" for the 1986 General Chapter of the men's Society.

In May 1990, the first international gathering of Lay Salvatorians from Austria, Brazil, and the United States took place at the Fathers' Motherhouse in Rome. The event revealed differing perspectives stemming from varying mentalities, cultures, and realities, but also highlighted the emerging sense of unity, which culminated in the search for a common name. The term "Familia Salvatoriana," which was proposed at that time, was later rejected for various reasons—probably not least because of the still limited or nonexistent sense of identity among members of all branches with the "Salvatorian Family."
After further meetings and a host of initiatives, we finally succeeded in bringing the right people to the table in 2003. By then, the original three lay representatives had grown to seven, and this marked the laying of the foundation for today's "*International Community of the Divine Savior*" → *ICDS*. In the process, several important questions needed to be resolved:

- Can we and do we—that is, priests, sisters, and laypeople—form an international lay community?
- What kind of criteria must laypersons meet to become members of such a lay community?
- What kind of structure should this international community get?
- Which language can and should serve as a "common primary language"—without offending the culture or mindset of others?
- Is recognition by the Vatican being considered? Is it necessary, and what are the benefits?

Those questions above offer only a rough overview of this rather complex subject matter. But the participants were in good spirits, very motivated, and showed great interest in producing high-quality, forward-looking work.

If we now turn our attention to the second question from earlier, it becomes clear that it should not simply be just any laypeople who come together here to form a community. No, these laypeople should work on an equal footing with the other two Salvatorian communities and, of course, carry out tasks related to the Salvatorian mission. They must be willing to be apostles of our time—that is, lay ministers who understand the demands of daily life while at the same time following the Salvatorian mission. - Which brings us to the question:

Do Lay Salvatorians have their own vocation?

Quite simply: YES—they do! Because without this vocation, they would not be able to live and act independently, as prescribed by the statutes, the dicastery, and thus the Church.

Recognizing, understanding, and following one's own vocation is a lifelong process and, ultimately, something that will always remain a mystery. For a vocation is a loving relationship between God and a person, and as such, it is often beyond rational comprehension. The decision to follow God's call must always be a voluntary one, since God does not wish to force anyone to do anything.

"The word of the Lord came to me," as it says in Jeremiah 1:4, for example, and this shows that a calling is not something I can or must actively do. A calling is something completely passive—something happens to me without any action on my part.

But this passive process will soon begin to make me feel a certain unease. The thought, the spark, the idea, the vision will keep appearing before my mind's eye and cannot simply be pushed aside. Experiencing a vocation is not always pleasant, for if it is genuine and serious, one cannot truly escape it—even if it does not currently fit my present life situation. That is why something will change in the life of a Lay Salvatorian.

In this regard, the Lay Salvatorians of the General Board recognized the following as early as 2009:

> *"The vocation of a Lay Salvatorian is made visible through the way he lives his life, which is characterized by simplicity and dedication to universality as a gift from God to his neighbor."*

And since 2015, the following has been included in the so-called „**Frequently Asked Questions**", (FAQs) published by the General Committee:

> *Lay Salvatorians are called to recognize God's love, as well as their own talents and abilities, in their own lives and to nurture them. They then use these gifts to serve others by every means inspired by the love of Christ, to breathe life into Salvatorian spirituality in their communities, and to find answers to the needs of our time.*
>
> *To be a lay Salvatorian and to live as one requires a vocation, because it is something you live out 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This vocation and the mission to bring God's goodness and love to everyone must be lived out everywhere—at home, at work, in the local community, and so on.*

In some conversations, the question arises as to what exactly the difference is between a "regular" Christian layperson and a Lay Salvatorian and whether there is—or should be—any difference at all. The FAQs provide a clear answer to this as well:

> *Lay Salvatorians have their own vocation, which invites them to further deepen their Christian commitment and to live it in a more conscious and serious way.*
>
> *Rooted in Salvatorian spirituality and charism, they seek to spread God's love to everyone around them by every means possible.*
>
> *Similarly, Lay Salvatorians also live by the words from the First Letter of St. Peter: „ Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence, …(1 Pet 3:15).*

So it is clear: There is a difference, and it stems from the special calling to take being a Christian truly seriously and to live it out in everyday life. However, this by no means means becoming

"better or even model Christians," for that would contradict the words from 1 Peter, which say: "… but respond with humility and reverence …"

What does this mean in practice?

As a Salvatorian, I am therefore called to bring God's love to others, to show it to them, and to help them experience it.

So it's just a matter of "*being a little nice and friendly*"—right? Or is there—or should there be—more to it?

What sounds so simple isn't so simple at all in today's reality and is often a challenge that demands a great deal. When we follow the daily news and then look out our (spiritual) window, we all face major challenges:

- all the poverty and exploitation in various parts of the world, including in our own local society—perhaps right next door;
- the economic imbalance, the reality of past colonization and its ongoing effects through so-called "big players" and multinational corporations;
- the associated ruthless exploitation of resources and mineral wealth and the armed conflicts that these trigger;
- access to or availability of drinking water and sufficient food
- the issues surrounding a sustainable and environmentally friendly energy supply;
- the climate crisis, with all its impacts on agriculture, food distribution, rising sea levels, and destructive extreme weather events;
- Fake news, social bots, algorithms, deepfakes, and "alternative facts" are increasingly influencing what we perceive and believe.
- but also a Catholic Church in crisis—as a result of abuse, backward-looking attitudes, a "head-in-the-sand" mentality, and the resulting increasing loss of its grassroots support;
- And last but not least, the question of where faith is moving in this tumultuous, restless, and troubled world?

It must be said once again that this list is by no means exhaustive. And, of course, no one can solve these problems alone; they can only be addressed through awareness, knowledge, and collaboration with others. And just because they are unpleasant, challenging, and disrupt our supposedly "perfect world," we cannot and must not turn a blind eye to them or look away—certainly not as Lay Salvatorians.

That is why as a Lay Salvatorian I need specific training and ongoing education in theology but also in general areas of knowledge. The reason is that I am called to provide authentic answers, in word and deed, to the signs of the times and the questions of my fellow human beings.

As we all know, the Salvatorians have no specific missionary mandate other than to bring God's love to all people, without exception, in every way and by every means. While this is a noble task, it also presents some pitfalls, because members of other religious or spiritual groups and communities, in particular, often have difficulty relating to us as "people for just about everything." And yet it is precisely this unrestricted, broad foundation that offers us a wide range of possibilities in today's world and enables us to respond to new challenges at any time.

That is precisely why it is so important for Salvatorians—whether priests, brothers, sisters, or Lay Salvatorians—to always keep their finger on the pulse of the times and stay on top of things. This can only be achieved through ongoing professional development and a corresponding openness, curiosity, and interest in new ideas. No field of knowledge should or may be excluded, because Salvatorians can and must also engage in contexts where they are not necessarily expected or where civil society does not traditionally anticipate the presence of "members of the Catholic Church."

Just tell me about God - or how evangelization can suceed today

Evangelization—a keyword and, at the same time, the central mission of the Salvatorians—is simply an unpleasant and not fitting topic these days. At least the mainstream media, because let's be honest, who of the people in the neighborhood really wants to officially hear about faith and God in everyday life? —Atheism or agnosticism is much more in vogue these days—or maybe not? — When you get to know some people a little better through repeated encounters, you often notice a search for a spiritual home that has been lost or that everyday life does not anymore fit with the image the Church conveys.

Evangelism—many people today have a misconception about it. The popular missions that were once very successful are all but dead and no longer resonate with people. Taizé gatherings or Catholic conventions, for example, are merely one-off events with rather limited long-term impact. Large-scale evangelical events, as we know them from some parts of the world—that is, "a large hall with a masculine, older, dynamic speaker on the podium" who fires off simple yet urgent messages into the crowd—some attendees then suddenly leap to their feet in ecstasy, stagger forward in a trance, and loudly declare their commitment to "Christ"—I don't think that's the answer or real reality either. And it's clear that this doesn't exactly elicit widespread sympathy in the traditional Catholic surroundings.

Although many people today are turning their backs on the Church because they are dissatisfied with what it offers and how it presents itself, they are nonetheless searching for spiritual answers—answers to their lives and their very existence. And we could and can provide these answers if we understand and apply evangelism correctly—namely, by addressing what sustains people throughout their lives:

- their often stifled and hindered
- their search for God or the transcendent, and
- the experience of living with their most important companion in life—namely, themselves. Opening up to and accepting this companion is often the greatest challenge.

As the last General Assembly also noted, Lay Salvatorians are constantly on a pilgrimage. And as such, they know that people who embark on a pilgrimage on foot—rather than by train, bus, or even plane—develop a very special closeness to this "companion." That is why, in everyday life, they can offer themselves as points of contact or mentors for those who may not feel at ease with the Church. They seize opportunities and open doors so that people can find their way to God—gently, creatively, and empathetically. And they strive to reconcile faith with everyday life once again. Things can no longer work the way they used to. That is why we need new perspectives, ideas, and solutions.

And they pass on their enthusiasm, sharing it with others, just as their ancestors throughout history have done. For the early apostles were simply so enthusiastic about Jesus' message and life that they just couldn't keep quiet. They simply had to tell others about it → "It is impossible for us not

to speak about what we have seen and heard," as it says in Acts 4:20. This is reminiscent of the burning passion that ignites others, as Blessed Francis described in one of his chapter addresses.

Cardinal Kevin Farrell, Prefect of the Dicastery for Laity, Family, and Life, said at the ceremony recognizing the ICDS:

"It is very important that we reflect on the reality of today's world. Now is the time of the laity in the Church. The missionary work of the great priests, the great priestly orders, and the men and women of religious life is over. Today, missionary work in the Church must be carried out by the laity. They are the ones who can bear witness to the true Gospel of Jesus Christ through what they do every day."

"The mission of Blessed Francis Jordan is to give laypeople in the Church and in today's world greater responsibility and greater recognition of their importance as missionaries."

We, the Lay Salvatorians, follow the vision of Blessed Francis and accept Cardinal Farrell's call to become missionaries and apostles of our time in the places where we are called and placed. So that, according to John 17:3, "... all may know HIM ..."

Let us, then, shape the future of the Church together.

And so, in conclusion, we can say that we haven't fallen out of step with the times. Quite the contrary—we're right in the thick of it!