

Reflections on the emerging place of the Laity of the Chevalier Family



On behalf of the International Council of the Laity of the Chevalier Family and Fr Hans, I present these reflections after 2 1/2 years in the Chair of the Council.

Firstly, I wish to express on behalf of the Council our humility at being trusted with the responsibility we have to work towards the development of supporting structures for the global family and our gratitude for your support, expertise and experience as we learn how to undertake such a venture. You would already know that each one of us have opened our hearts to the Sacred Heart and have committed our lives, alongside you, to share that good news. We have all worked very hard in our regions and for the global family and we look back and recognise with humility that God's Heart is working through our hearts.

What I see happening in our Chevalier Family aligns closely with the movements that are emerging in the global church. The push by Pope Francis towards a synodal church that is humble and listening; and is prepared to learn and be of service to healing the heart of creation is taking form in the partnership between our lay family and the professed family.

Jules Chevalier was a man ahead of his time, and while it has taken 165 years to begin to fully realise his vision, the discipleship of equals that is emerging is entirely consistent with his original vision and the movement of the Spirit in these times. It is also deeply rooted in the traditions of the early church and the movements of collaborated effort between laity and professed during the Middle Ages that led to so many significant organisations working to alleviate the ills of the time.

If we believe that the Spirit is moving amongst us, calling us on, then it is very important that we keep challenging each other with visions and images of a possible future. We, members of the Chevalier Family have a gift for the church at large with our understanding of the role of the laity and I believe this enables us to be at the forefront of the movement towards a reimagining of church, but only if we all share the vision and take every opportunity to speak of its importance in our Spirituality of the Heart. A truly collaborating model of ministry must become one of the key lens' through which we express our charism.

In order to work towards a deep partnership we will be required to ask hard questions of each other as true growth never comes without some pain.

One important question for both lay and professed to ask is about attitudes of clericalism and entitlement that may impede collaborated ministry. It is imperative to recognise that the commitment of the professed is different to the commitment of the laity and to work together does not entitle the laity to come into the professed world and take over. As we seek new ways of being church, it must be with a recognition of the commitment and human sacrifice of generations of professed people that has enabled ministries to flourish. At the same time, it may be important for the professed to look together with the laity at structures, attitudes and governance procedures and ask if they are still the best way to respond to the needs of this time and to move towards greater collaboration. This

questioning needs to be done with an openness to new possibilities but with a sensitivity towards what has been.

That leads to a further question about the need for ongoing formation amongst the professed and the laity to enable us to work together as equal partners in ministry. An important discussion topic for the Lay Council at this meeting is about the identification of leaders within groups around the world and the means by which we offer them the personal and spiritual formation that will enable them to appropriately participate in the leadership of their communities. Our professed brothers and sisters may also need to consider the possibility that there is an ongoing need for formation to enable them to work with the laity as equal partners in ministry. It is worth noting that in the 1877 Constitutions, Fr Chevalier mentions the formation of lay people and groups of lay people in the field of Spirituality of the Heart among the first objectives of his congregation, even before he mentions missionary work and parish work.

Do we need to ask questions about our understandings of church and ministry within the global family? While it is not appropriate to place first world attitudes into contexts and cultures that are different, there may be a particular need to form the professed so that, in whatever culture they minister they are not creating a dependency amongst laity but are fostering a more mature spirituality; and where lay people hold leadership positions are able to take on a serving and accompanying role.

For the laity, we too must take a second look at our place in the life of the church and as members of the Chevalier Family. The time has come for we lay people to stand up and recognise that we must shape and form our spirituality, as it is lived in lay lives, from the common root-stock of our Christian Spirituality of the Heart heritage, but reflecting our own, particular way of life.

For many of us, whose spirituality has been nurtured at the feet of the Religious, and through whose witness we ourselves came to experience the Sacred Heart, that is a very uncomfortable notion. We could be tempted to view our living of Spirituality of the Heart as a 'watered down' version of the real charism – but that was never Chevalier's vision. Our challenge as laity is firstly to allow ourselves to accept that there is radical equality and then to stand and take our place as participants in the Body of Christ. For too long we have been too passive and too dependent.

Do we need to ask questions about the place of the International Council of the Laity in the global governance structures? While the laity have no place in the internal family decisions of the MSC, FDNAC and MSC sisters do we need to consider how we can be a part of the decision-making process on matters pertaining to vision and mission on the international and national level?

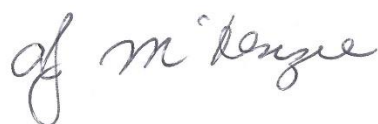
One consequence of this re-imagining is that we may need to consider the possibility that alternative ministerial systems and roles may need to be authorised alongside the ordained priesthood as legitimate forms of ministry. It is very uncomfortable to even suggest this but it is an obvious offshoot of an organisation that is looking again at its structures and

processes to find the best ways to offer the love in the heart of Jesus as the remedy for the ills of the world.

In summary and in practical language what I am speaking of could be expressed in the following way:

- We must work together to find language and symbol and metaphor that describes our lay experience of God's love. We must be alert to the possibility of God's call in the lives of our friends and families and not be afraid to suggest that the spirit may be moving in that persons' life.
- We must be courageous enough to develop relevant and accessible rituals that enable secular people, who may not connect with the institutional church, to give expression to their longings and to deepen their experience of God.
- We must form open and welcoming communities that actively seek to do as Chevalier said: to answer the needs of the people of our time.
- We must engage deeply with the Eucharistic and Sacramental structures of our church, but be brave enough to recognise that God's spirit is not restricted to those places, and our call as a Eucharistic people is to be deeply fed and nourished, so we can leave the four walls and go out into the hungry and suffering world, as Jesus did.
- We must follow the way of Jesus and his call to us; and recognise the imperative to develop a deep and personal life of prayer – however we can in our lives. We can do nothing unless we find our own way of deep, daily prayer – and that usually means some form of silent presence to God.
- From this place, we can take up the radical equality that is conferred on us all by our Baptism and common mission and is reflective of the early Christian communities and Paul's understanding of Church (e.g. 1 Cor 12: 4- 11 and his image of the Church as the body of Christ (Romans 12: 3-8; 1 Corinthians. 12: 12- 27; Ephesians 4: 1 – 16)

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