



Introduction

The CIOFS Presidency, during its meeting in October 2012, entrusted the Presence in the World Commission with the task of offering a brief, web-based formation course to help Secular Franciscans better engage in the social realm by meeting the challenges set forth in the *Conclusions* from the 2011 OFS General Chapter in Sao Paulo (Brazil).

Every monthly dossier will be divided into four sections: a brief theoretical treatment of the theme; a list of other sources, organisations and websites that deal with the theme; the description of a concrete case study; and some questions aimed at encouraging dialogue in fraternity and/or some practical suggestions for concrete action. The Presence in the World Commission will develop these outlines with the help of other contributors. The commission is currently made up of Attilio and Rosa Galimberti (Coordinators, Italy), M. Consuelo Núñez (Presidency's Councillor, Venezuela), Ana María Olmedo Ramos (Guatemala), Fr Armando Trujillo Cano TOR (General Assistant, Mexico) and Lovro Sučić (Collaborator, Croatia).

This course's first dossier deals with the role of the laity in society. We hope you find it useful. Furthermore, we encourage you to send us your comments, suggestions and corrections so that we can continually improve this project and help it better serve your needs. May the Lord grant you his Peace!

1. The role of the laity in society

The Church's teaching on the role of the laity in society is clear:



They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven. In this way they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity. Therefore, since they are tightly bound up in all types of temporal affairs it is their special task to order and to throw light upon these affairs in such a way that they may come into being and then continually increase according to Christ to the praise

of the Creator and the Redeemer. (LG 31)

The Gospel's proclamation of hope is addressed to the entire world and it is **in the world** and **through the things of the world** that the lay faithful respond to God's call and witness to his **presence**, incarnating in their lives the work of God's manifestation.

We have received an important teaching from the Second Vatican Council: the world is not a space, a place or means of sanctification. Rather it is the **way** of living out the dignity of the children of God amidst the most hidden wounds of humanity that Christ bore unto himself. The laity, furthermore, are "experts" in the very issues of societal life (marriage, the family, human culture, politics, economics, etc.). They are the Church's principal and unique presence in these areas since "the Church requires the special help of those who live in the world, are versed in different institutions and specialties, and grasp their innermost significance in the eyes of both believers and unbelievers. With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age" (GS 44).

By listening to the world, the Church is not only attentive to its instruments and language, but through them it seeks to embrace the newness, hopes, challenges and presence of the God who is at work in all things. Pope Paul VI writes this about the laity in his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii nuntiandi*:

Their own field of evangelizing activity is the vast and complicated world of politics, society and economics, but also the world of culture, of the sciences and the arts, of international life, of the mass media. It also includes other realities which are open to evangelization, such as human love, the family, the education of children and adolescents, professional work, suffering. The more Gospel-inspired lay people there are engaged in these realities, clearly involved in them, competent to promote them and conscious that they must exercise to the full their Christian powers which are often buried and suffocated, the more these realities will be at the service of the kingdom of God and therefore of salvation in Jesus Christ, without in any way losing or sacrificing their human content but rather pointing to a transcendent dimension which is often disregarded. (EN 70)



Pope Benedict XVI's social teaching follows from the thinking of Paul VI. In his encyclical, *Caritas in veritate*, he reflects on some of the fundamental principles of the Church's social engagement: "dialogue", "fraternity", the family and work, as well as giving particular attention to the importance of business and the market. The Church needs thinking Christians who use their intelligence for the spreading of the faith. It needs Christians who have the courage to embody the logic of being and feeling poor as the driving engine of development and growth. Boldness is needed to witness to the fact that Christ has given us the logic of gratuity and that loss does not mean failure. Benedict XVI says a **conversion of the mind** and a different way of thinking is needed to achieve this objective. "What is needed is an effective shift in mentality which can lead to the adoption of *new life-styles* 'in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of

common growth are the factors which determine consumer choices, savings and investments" (CV 51).

2. Sources and References

Sources that inspire us to live the social mission are found in the specific articles of the Rule and the OFS Constitutions, as well as the Vatican II documents already cited – *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*. Added to these are the apostolic exhortation from Paul VI (*Evangelii nuntiandi*) and the more recent encyclical letter of Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, both quoted earlier. Other useful documents include the apostolic exhortation from John Paul II, *Christifideles laici*; the Vatican II decree, *Apostolicam actuositatem*; and the letter from the Ministers General of the Franciscan Family, *The Mission of the Franciscan Lay Faithful in the Church and the World*. Another essential source is the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, produced by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, which our recent General Chapters have encouraged us to study and use.

There are also many NGOs active in this area, both secular and those of religious, Christian or Franciscan inspiration. Here are the websites of just a few:



Franciscans International: www.franciscansinternational.org

Pax Christi International:

<http://www.paxchristi.net/international/eng/index.php>

International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent:
www.icrc.org

Peace Brigade International: <http://www.peacebrigades.org>

The United Nations: www.un.org

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Pages/WelcomePage.aspx>

The Mexican Institute for Social Doctrine of the Church: www.imdosoc.org

We also note the work of *Caritas*, which has international, national and local websites. The national bishops' Conferences around the world also provide valuable resources on their websites.

3. A case study

Giorgio La Pira – Politician and Peacemaker (Italy)ⁱ

Giorgio La Pira was born on 9 January 1904 in Pozzallo (Sicily) where he lived the first years of his life. Between 1920 and 1922, while a student in Florence, he began taking Catholic values seriously and deepened his faith, spending as many hours in prayer as on his studies. After he earned a law degree in 1926, he made Florence his home. Following in the footsteps of the man who provided him with spiritual inspiration, the future Blessed Contardo Ferrini, he began a long career as professor of Roman law. He also dedicated himself to studying the “Summa” of St Thomas Aquinas, looking at the entire structure of law and the theological vision of Christianity.



Meanwhile, in 1927 La Pira became a Third Order Dominican and in 1930 a founding member of the *Secular Institute of the Regality of Christ*. According to its statutes, the institute “is a community of laypeople who, through a particular consecration to God, is in the service of others”. Upon joining, La Pira took vows of poverty, obedience and chaste celibacy. The institute is part of the great spiritual movement of the Third Order Franciscans, whose goals and ideals it promotes. Francis of Assisi – and his symbol and message, Pax et Bonum – was an essential and constant model in the life of La Pira who also was active in Catholic Action and in charitable works for the poor. In 1934 he founded in Florence *l’Opera del pane di San Procolo* to help the poorest of the poor and homeless. During the Second World War and its aftermath he was an inspiration to Jews, political dissidents, the unemployed, the homeless and the abandoned.

He worked closely with Cardinal Elia Della Costa of Florence in protecting the Jews. Through his association with the cardinal La Pira discovered a profound “taste” for the Bible as the only book in which to interpret the history of the times. After the armistice on 8 September 1943 he left Florence for Fonterutoli near Siena and then went to Rome where he began writing for *L’Osservatore Romano*. In 1946 he was elected to the Constitutional Assembly as a Christian Democrat deputy and became one of the main architects of the Italian Constitution. In 1950, together with other great Catholic lay figures of the time, he founded the journal, *Cronache Sociali*. He also published “*L’attesa della povera gente*” (The Expectations of the Poor), a manifesto calling for full employment.

In 1951 he felt the call to dedicate himself to peace in the world and on 6 January he appealed to Stalin for peace in Korea. In June he was elected Mayor of Florence, serving from 1951-1957 and 1961-1965. During those years he energetically worked to create a more liveable city that could provide jobs, homes, schools, hospitals and churches. He also sought to make Florence more than just a tourist city and helped it become the centre for a cultural and political movement that would promote peace, as well as a Christian and human civilisation. He tried to stimulate action for peace in the face of the nuclear threat by organising the “Conferences for Peace and Christian Civilisation” (1952-1956) and in the Conference for Mayors of Capitals throughout the World in 1955.

La Pira spearheaded the “Mediterranean Colloquies” to promote peace and coexistence among Christians, Jews and Muslims. The first one in October 1958 brought together for the very first time Arabs and Israelis and French and Algerians to discuss the urgent problems dividing peoples. At the invitation of the Soviet Union he travelled to Moscow in 1959 where he



defended the principles of détente and disarmament before representatives of the Supreme Soviet. Before embarking on that journey he went to Fatima to ask protection from Our Lady. He also wrote to communities of cloistered nuns, asking them to accompany him to the USSR with their prayers. On 24 January 1960 he met the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Athenagoras I. Their talks focused on the unity of the Churches as an indispensable pathway towards unity among peoples and nations.

He was convinced that the prayers of the cloistered nuns ensured the success and effectiveness of his peacemaking efforts. And he involved the women in this work by regularly updating them on his various meetings. In 1976 he worked for the defence of the unborn and called for universal disarmament.

Giorgio La Pira died on 5 November 1977 and was buried in a simple ceremony, according to his wishes, in the Florentine cemetery of Rifredi. On 9 January 1986 Cardinal Silvano Piovanelli of Florence formally launched the cause of beatification for this great Catholic layman. With his Christian vision he was a “merchant of hope” for his city, his nation and the entire world.

4. Questions for reflection and dialogue in community

1. How does your fraternity perceive of the role that the laity plays in society?
2. How does your fraternity try to “to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age”?
3. How can your fraternity use this formational material to open itself “to the human realities” and extended itself “outwards in a social context that challenges us”, as was asked by the OFS General Chapter in 2011?



ⁱ Cfr. BORRELLI A., *Servo di Dio Giorgio La Pira. Laico, politico, operatore di pace*, in *Santi, beati e testimoni*, Internet (01.12.2012): <http://www.santiebeati.it/dettaglio/91511>