

## Article

# Formation of Lay Catholics: Franciscan Inspirations

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**Abstract:** Currently, the formation of lay Catholics is one of the key tasks of the Church. The Synod of Bishops, *Towards a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission*, convened by Pope Francis, served as a reminder of this. In its new format, i.e., phased consultations and meetings, the Synod calls for the involvement of lay Catholics in listening to one another and recognising directions for the Church renewal. This emphasises the need for an ongoing effort to form the faithful. There are many suggestions in the Church for the formation of lay Catholics. Franciscan spirituality, which continues to inspire and attract people, is one of these suggestions. In his teaching, the current pope likes to refer to St. Francis of Assisi, drawing from his writings and example of life. This work aimed to present selected elements of Franciscan spirituality that seem useful in the formation of lay Catholics for their service in the Church and the world. Six elements that can be drawn from rich Franciscan spirituality were analysed and they seem relevant for today's Church: fidelity to the Church, openness to the world and rejection of its evil, apostolate "in via", promotion of the laity, poverty at the service of the Gospel, and openness to the people rejected by society. The discussion of these elements is preceded by a synthetic presentation of the nature and purpose of the formation of lay Catholics.

**Keywords:** lay Catholics; formation; St. Francis; Franciscan spirituality



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## 1. Introduction

The renewal of lay theology should be considered one of the most important achievements of the Second Vatican Council. Lay theology results in, among other things, restoring the dignity and role that derive from their membership in the community of the Church to the lay faithful. By restoring the subjective character of being in the Church to the lay faithful, the value of their salvific activity in the Church and the world was thus recognised.

The evangelical allegory of the vine and the branches in John Paul II's post-synodal exhortation, *Christifideles laici*, emphasises the call for lay Catholics to continually grow, mature, and bear fruit. God invites a person with free will into His vineyard, and this invitation includes the need for both an integral and continuous formation (ChL 57). Formation is the foundation for the full and proper involvement of lay Catholics in the life and mission of the Church. The lay person, formed according to the teaching of the Church, can avoid both the passivity that is so present today and actions that are appropriate to clergy and consecrated persons but are incompatible with the vocation of the lay person in the Church and the world.

The formation of lay Catholics is currently an important and even urgent challenge for the Church, and it should be agreed that there is still much to be done in this area both at the level of awakening the awareness and concrete commitment of lay Catholics, as well as the functioning and cooperation of all the faithful in the Church (see EG 81; Czaja 2006). The issue has taken on a new meaning in the light of the Synod of Bishops initiated by Pope Francis, *Towards a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission*, which has a new format and is divided into three phases that are spread over three years: local phase, continental phase, and universal phase. In this synodal process, which aims to consult and listen to all who are baptised, lay Catholics have a special role ([The Preparatory Document for the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2021](#)).

It seems appropriate to ask what original contribution Franciscan spirituality can make to the formation of lay Catholics. After all, Franciscan spirituality continues to inspire many Christians around the world, and its topicality seems to be stressed by Pope Francis, who not only took the name of the Saint of Assisi, but also likes to refer to his example and guidance in speeches and documents, such as in the encyclicals *Laudato si'* (2015) and *Fratelli tutti* (2020). In seeking to answer this question, it is necessary to first synthesise what the formation process is and what is its purpose (I), and then to present some Franciscan inspirations that can be used in the formation of lay Catholics (II).

## 2. Materials and Methods

The main research hypothesis of the article is that Franciscan spirituality contains specific elements that can and should be used in the contemporary formation of lay Catholics. The source materials used in this work include selected documents of the contemporary Church (documents of the Second Vatican Council and teachings of the popes) and the writings of St. Francis of Assisi (Rules). The former materials served as a synthetic presentation of the Christian formation of lay Catholics: its assumptions, goals, and dimensions. The latter materials were used for identification of useful and current elements of Franciscan spirituality in the formation of lay Catholics at this stage of the Church's life and activity. Moreover, reference was made to selected studies addressing the role and tasks of lay Catholics and their formation, as well as the Franciscan Order, elements of Franciscan spirituality and its influence on the pastoral activity of the Church.

In this article, the method of analysis, synthesis, interpretation, and comparison has been applied. In the first step, an analysis of selected source texts and literature is made in terms of the formation of lay Catholics, its main assumptions, goals, and dimensions. Then, using the method of synthesis, the most important elements that make up formation are collated. Similarly, the selected writings of St. Francis and selected literature addressing aspects of the Franciscan Order were analysed and typical elements of Franciscan spirituality that are useful when considering the formation of lay Catholics were identified. In a second step, the obtained data were compared, interpreted, and applied to the formation of lay Catholics, identifying typical elements of Franciscan spirituality that can be applied in today's process of said formation.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Formation of Lay Catholics

Franciscan spirituality, with its focus on living according to the Gospel, has strongly penetrated the fabric of the Church. This relationship must be kept in mind when addressing the issue of defining the formation process itself and its dimensions. In terms of the formation of lay Catholics in the Franciscan spirit, it is important to emphasise the relationship with the Church and her teaching: in this case the teaching that concerns formation that is generally defined as a process aimed at forming someone, giving him/her a certain form. This formation includes what is traditionally called the process of mind and will training.

The human person, made in the image and likeness of God (see Genesis 1:26), was called to achieve the perfection intended by the Creator. Hence, the formation of human beings is to serve the purpose of embodying the image of God in their humanity. The fullest and most perfect embodiment of the image of God was accomplished in Jesus Christ, in whom the ideal human being is revealed (Second Vatican Council 2002d; Fiałkowski 2009). In a biblical-theological sense, formation means striving for spiritual and human perfection through the imitation of Christ (Wątroba 1999). In this spirit, in his exhortation *Christifideles laici*, John Paul II defined Christian formation as “a continuous process of personal maturation and conformity to Christ, according to the will of the Father, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit” (ChL 57). Therefore, it can be said that formation is an activity aimed at forming consciousness, beliefs, and attitudes that enable the faithful to

live the Christian life according to their self-identified vocation ([Second Vatican Council 2002a](#), Declaration on Christian Education; see [Marauri Ceballos 2016](#)).

According to the Second Vatican Council, the formation of a person is a process that begins from early childhood and covers all stages of human life. It uses the example of parents and educators and the pedagogical means available ([Second Vatican Council 2002b](#), Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity). Christian formation is a growth initiated in baptism, in a spirit of evangelical love and freedom in order to develop one's personality. In the process of formation, it is also essential to know the world in the light of faith ([Second Vatican Council 2002a](#), Declaration on Christian Education).

The teaching of the Church emphasises that formation is a multifaceted process that encompasses human, intellectual, spiritual, and apostolic dimensions and, at the same time, involves an integral process that harmoniously develops all dimensions of human life. At the same time, formation is self-formation, which indicates a conscious and responsible influence on one's own development that continues throughout a person's life (see ChL 60, 63).

Formation aims to help laypeople discern their vocation and accept it with joy and gratitude as an expression of God's care for each person and as a source of dignity. It is also about taking on God's appointed tasks with faithfulness and generosity. The discernment of God's will for the life of the believer is a life-long process, however, it is possible to identify particularly important and decisive moments in the discernment of God's call and in the undertaking of the mission entrusted by God. Such a moment in the life of a lay Catholic is undoubtedly youth. This does not mean, however, that God does not reveal His will in every season of life, which obliges the lay Catholic to make a constant effort to be alert and listen to the voice of God ([Fiałkowski 2009](#)).

The first and primary vocation of the Christian is the call to holiness. The call to holiness springs from baptism and is renewed in other sacraments. God not only calls to holiness but also gives the human person His help. Christian holiness, which involves perfect love of God and neighbour, is by its very nature dynamic and presupposes constant growth. The measure of this perfection is Jesus Christ, who is obedient to the will of the Father, and the agent of sanctification is the Holy Spirit, of whom the believer should be the temple. Therefore, the fruitfulness of all Christian work depends on union with Christ (see GeE 19–21).

It is believed that holiness is a privilege that is reserved for the clergy and the consecrated persons, and the call to holiness is rather associated with the necessity of detachment from, or even escape from, temporal reality. However, the Second Vatican Council teaches that "all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity" ([Second Vatican Council 2002c](#)). Hence, it is necessary to form people in such a way as to avoid the widespread belief that holiness is an extraordinary life, accessible only to "geniuses" who are often detached from everyday life.

The ways of holiness are manifold and suited to every vocation, and we are to sanctify ourselves in the most ordinary circumstances of our lives (see [John Paul II 2001](#), *Novo millennio ineunte*; GeE 11, 14). The formation of lay Catholics must lead to the discovery of their specific vocation, which is a way of life and sanctification. By God's will, lay Catholics remain in the world, and this is a situation planned and intended by God. Laypeople are called and intended to worship God by using temporal things and contributing to the temporal progress of society ([Second Vatican Council 2002d](#)).

Lay Catholics, however, are not called to fulfil their mission only in the world. This is because they not only belong to the Church, but they also constitute the Church in which they occupy their proper place. As full members of the Church, who are embraced in her mystery, they are endowed with a specific vocation that distinguishes them but does not separate them from the clergy and the consecrated persons (ChL 9).

The discovery of vocation by lay Catholics, which is the goal of formation, cannot stop at the stage of merely discerning what the Lord God demands of them. Their vocation must manifest itself in concrete actions in various life situations. Hence, the task of the lay

Catholic is to know and understand, increasingly, the richness of his/her vocation and at the same time to live it ever more fully (ChL 59; see [Fiałkowski 2010](#)).

### 3.2. *Selected Elements of Formation of Lay Catholics in the Franciscan Spirit*

In the process of the formation of lay Catholics, it is advisable to take advantage of the interest in St. Francis of Assisi and Franciscan spirituality in its broadest sense. It can be considered that its peculiarity, compared to other spiritualities, is its simplicity and universal character, which makes it a still valid and relatively simple proposal for contemporary believers. The rich Franciscan spirituality appears to be multiform and difficult to define in a clear way. It is composed of many elements, and it is difficult to definitively point to characteristics that clearly distinguish Franciscan spirituality from other spiritualities existing in the Church. Perhaps, as has already been mentioned, Franciscan spirituality has so deeply penetrated the fabric of the Church and culture at large that it is difficult to identify its original elements today. In view of this, it seems to be necessary to select those aspects that are particularly relevant to today's challenges and use them in the formation of lay Catholics. This is not an easy task; such a choice is often debatable and is more of an impetus for further exploration. The main inspiration for proposing this subject is an interesting study on St. Francis of Assisi by the eminent French medievalist Jacques Le Goff (1924–2014) and elements highlighted in it, which ought to be looked at from the perspective of the process of the formation of lay Catholics ([Le Goff 2001](#)).

#### 3.2.1. Fidelity to the Church

St. Francis of Assisi, “a Catholic and apostolic man of God” (Julian of Speyer), was a faithful son of the Catholic Church throughout his life. The Catholic Church was always his mother and mistress. For St. Francis of Assisi, living the Gospel of Jesus Christ and living in the Catholic Church were realities that he never separated. St. Francis desired that his followers always be subject and submissive to the Church, truly grounded in the Catholic faith, and faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ ([St. Francis 2002b](#)). St. Francis' devotion and love for the Church and his emphasis on due fidelity to the Church clearly set Franciscan spirituality apart from most religious movements of his time. Often those movements had anti-church and anti-sacramental attitudes, which led to resentment against the clergy. St. Francis of Assisi respectfully referred to the Pope, bishops, and priests, emphasising their dignity derived from God through the sacrament of Holy Orders.

It can be said that St. Francis did not make a revolution, he did not go against the Church and its unworthy members, nor did he seek to create an alternative community; St. Francis of Assisi transformed the Church with his conversion, repentance, and life according to the Gospel. St. Francis' fidelity to the Church was not blind or naive. He saw the sins and weaknesses of people of the Church, and in his *Rule*, he included the possibility of insubordination when superior's orders are not in line with conscience ([St. Francis 2002b](#)).

It seems that today this dimension of Franciscan spirituality can be very useful in the formation of lay Catholics. This is because they, like most people today, follow a trend of dislike, suspicion, and even denial of all institutions. Nowadays, evident disillusionment and rejection of the Church can be tempered by the humble approach of St. Francis of Assisi, who sought to separate sin from the sinner and weak people from the lofty causes and realities they serve. This allows one to embrace the Church as a community of both saints and sinners, in which the mission of Jesus Christ continues.

#### 3.2.2. Openness to the World and Rejection of Its Evil

The attitude of St. Francis of Assisi demonstrates an admiration for the world around him, in which he sees the beauty of the Creator Himself and the expression of God's love for humanity. It would be fair to say that this affirmation stems from St. Francis' belief in God's creation of the world, as well as his conviction of God's constant care for the world and His presence in history. At the same time, it is possible to notice St. Francis of Assisi's

opposition to evil and sin present in the world and, above all, his opposition to rejecting God as Lord and Saviour (Le Goff 2001).

The former opposition clearly arises from the reflection of the biblical approach to the world that is viewed ambiguously in the Scripture. The world is the work of God, created out of His infinite love and wisdom and directed towards all that was accomplished in Christ. Therefore, the world is a purposeful reality that has meaning. The creation of the world begins the story of salvation, and the world itself becomes the setting where the story takes place. It is clearly a positive worldview (Gocko 2003). However, it should be noted that the world in the Scripture also has a negative meaning. This is particularly evident in the theology of the Gospel of John, in which the world is associated with the temporal, the transient, the evil, and the destructible. The Gospel of John sees the world more in the anthropological sense. According to St. John, such a world is a world of people who are indifferent or hostile to Jesus and his disciples (see Jn 7:7; 16, 20, 33; 1 Jn 3:1) and a world that does not have the Holy Spirit (see Jn 14:17) but has its own spirit that is bound to sin—thus becoming a place of Satan’s activity (see Jn 12:31)—and can betray God (Lesquivit and Grelot 1990).

Even today it seems highly desirable to form the right attitude towards the world, for we are in danger of becoming totally focused on the things of this world, which partly or completely obscure the perspective of eternity. This is compounded by failing to see sin, disregarding it, or even considering it a good thing. Such an extreme can also create counter-productive attitudes that reject the world, solely treating it as evil. The perspective adopted by St. Francis of Assisi, which is deeply biblical and inscribed in the faith of the Church, seems to be a good antidote to the above-mentioned dangerous tendencies and thus it could be used in the Christian formation of today’s Catholics.

### 3.2.3. Apostolate “In Via”

St. Francis broke the pastoral patterns of his time and boldly went out to the people. He was not afraid, in a sense, to draw on the experience of spiritual movements that proposed a reform of the Church by defying it. At the same time, St. Francis of Assisi did not reject all the solutions that were used in the activities of the Church of his time. He respected and renewed those solutions, poured new life into them, and adapted them to new conditions. To a certain extent, St. Francis contesting the social order of the time and certain attitudes in the Church did not lead to a revolution that could have ruined everything, but rather opened the Church—and, in a sense, the world—to true reform. The Saint of Assisi transformed the Church and the world in which he lived by living the Gospel and also by loving the Church (Le Goff 2001; Matura 1999).

This newness and openness are evident in the missionary activity of the followers of St. Francis of Assisi, to whom he suggested that they preach the Gospel among infidels, especially by setting a good example. St. Francis of Assisi was the first of the founders of religious orders who included in his *Rule* a chapter on missionary expeditions to countries inhabited by pagans (see St. Francis 2002a, 2002b; Iriarte 1999; Prejs 2011). His followers were not to engage in arguments and disputes but be submissive to all creatures for God’s sake, and openly acknowledge that they were Christians. In this approach, witnesses of Christ do not focus on fighting, judging others, and engaging in polemics, but they show by their lives who Jesus Christ, in whom they believe, is for them (St. Francis 2002a).

Following the example of their founder, Franciscans courageously sought new solutions and new pastoral spaces, but also tried to preserve tried-and-tested models. Franciscan apostolic activity is distinguished by openness to new forms of activity and a courageous search for more effective means of action. At the same time, there is a strong emphasis on the use of apostolic solutions that better serve the Church at a given moment in history and are more relevant to the needs and expectations of specific social groups. This requires, first of all, getting to know the milieu of the people among whom a Franciscan carries out his ministry. In this context, it is worth mentioning the work of the Franciscan St. Maximilian Kolbe (1894–1941), who, in his apostolic activity, boldly used the latest achievements of



technology and organisation (Dyczewski 1992). Kolbe wrote, “Limiting private needs as much as possible, leading a life as poor as possible, we will use at least the most modern means. In a patched habit, in torn shoes, on an airplane of the latest type, if this is necessary for the salvation and sanctification of more souls” (Kolbe 1937).

This characteristic feature of the apostolate in the Franciscan spirit seems appropriate to the conditions of mission that is undertaken by the Church today. Dynamic and diverse transformations of the contemporary world need courageous reactions and openness to new solutions that better address the people living today. This adapted apostolate, however, must maintain the unchanging principles from Revelation and not disregard the experience of previous generations. However, this does not mean merely maintaining old solutions, but courageously and creatively confronting new challenges and problems while proclaiming the Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ to people living in specific circumstances. Therefore, the point is a formation that will enable lay Catholics to proclaim the Gospel on an Areopagus of modern times, especially that which is new and demanding, such as mixed media. This requires the pastoral and missionary conversion that Pope Francis so often and consistently calls for: “I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are. ‘Mere administration’ can no longer be enough. Throughout the world, let us be ‘permanently in a state of mission’” (EG 25).

### 3.2.4. Promotion of the Laity

From the perspective of the contemporary formation of lay Catholics, is the emphasis on his/her subjectivity in the Church and the world is particularly important. The urgent task is to overcome the peculiar dualism between laity and clergy, which often paralyses the Christian ministry of the Church, generating passivity and a comfortable distance from pressing challenges, and sometimes fuelling clericalism that drives many people away from the Church and the message of the Gospel.

St. Francis can be described as a man who, in a certain sense, contributed to the advancement of lay Catholics in the community of the Church. As he saw their desire to follow Christ radically, which he himself undertook and practised, he offered them his own vision of following Christ (Secular Franciscan Order) that was more suitable to their state of life, well-adapted, and reconciled with the duties of their status (Wróbel 2006). He also addressed a letter to them: *Letter to the Faithful* (St. Francis 2009), classified as one of the main writings of the Saint which can be understood as a message not only for an ecclesial community but also for the whole of lay society (Michetti 2009). As E. Mariani stressed, St. Francis’ concern expressed in that *Letter* is pastoral in nature and shows his recognition of the universal vocation of all the faithful, including the laity, to holiness (Mariani 2006).

R. Manselli underscored that Franciscans contributed to the development of an intense religiousness that “far from abstract theological reasoning, spoke to the heart, touched on topics accessible to all, posed simple and concrete questions, went down to reach even the most hidden but no less important aspects of everyday life, such as family life, relations between spouses, relations with children, in general ethics and problems of human relationships” (Manselli 2006). Nowadays, the Church is in need of action that will contribute to imbuing culture at large with the light of the Gospel (see Second Vatican Council 2002d). It is a difficult task in which an irreplaceable role falls to lay Catholics, who are capable of reaching out to a world that is especially given and entrusted to them. According to the Second Vatican Council, a specific characteristic of the laity is their secular character (*indoles saecularis*) (see Second Vatican Council 2002c). By God’s will they remain in the world, and this is a situation that is planned and intended by the Creator. It is about a specific vocation, a permanent way of life, and sanctification for laypeople. The laity are called and intended to worship God by using temporal things as they contribute to the progress of society. Because of their “embeddedness” in the world, lay Catholics are called to seek the Kingdom of God and order temporal affairs according to the Creator’s plan (Fiałkowski 2015).

### 3.2.5. Poverty at the Service of the Gospel

St. Francis of Assisi, who was inspired by the poverty and humility of Jesus Christ, made a life choice to break away from the affluent lifestyle in which he had grown up. The economic and social relations of that time divided people into the poor and the rich and privileged: *minores* and *maiores*. St. Francis chose a place among the poor and wanted his community to be *minoritas* (*minores*) (Iammarrone 2001). *Minoritas* meant, above all, adopting the right attitude towards God, recognising one's own limitations and weaknesses, and knowing how to discover in every human being a neighbour with whom Christ is identified. The virtues of poverty and humility are united in *minoritas*; they are the guidelines of the Franciscan way in which there is no place for despising others or judging anyone (Iriarte 1999; Niezgoda 1995).

The simple means of evangelisation continue to be effective even today, as a proof of trust in God on whom, after all, the effectiveness of the work carried out also depends. Distance and freedom from attachment to things, not only in the time of St. Francis but also today, continue to result in availability and mobility, in that time facilitated the distinction between means and ends. The power of witnessing in simplicity and poverty cannot be overestimated. The generous use of available resources for evangelisation in the broad sense also opens up new avenues of charitable activity that is capable of responding to the challenges of the poor today.

As Manselli noted, poverty, which St. Francis embraced, is a sort of condition of uncertainty and of putting one's life at risk every day. It is only in this situation that we can empathise with the psychological and social situation of the poor. It is then easier to give appropriate, truly solidarity-based, and evangelical aid and support to the poor (Manselli 2006).

Poverty framed in this way can speak more clearly not only to believers but also to those who are seeking God, becoming an effective tool for receiving and proclaiming the Gospel in a world that Pope Francis does not hesitate to describe as the world succumbing to an obsession with consumption. The consumerist attitude makes a person focus solely on "having". His/her main goal in life becomes the constant and exaggerated desire to possess, multiply or replace material things, and raise the standard of living. The measure of his/her success in life is material success, and his/her life ideal is prosperity at any price. The emptiness filling the human heart makes a person need more things to buy, own, and consume. The consumerist attitude leads to a hedonistic interpretation of human existence, giving rise to individualism, materialism, a sense of temporariness, uncertainty about tomorrow, greed and injustice, provoking violence, isolation, egoism, and disregard for others, especially those who are unable to succeed in multiplying material goods (see LS 204; Fiałkowski 2017).

Pope Francis notes that today's obsessive consumerism is a subjective reflection of the technocratic paradigm that makes people consider themselves free as long as they retain the supposed freedom to consume (LS 203). It is not difficult then to succumb to the temptation to make material goods and consumption the most important values. This attitude poses a threat to the environment and thus to human beings themselves. Pope Francis sees the cure for such an attitude in restoring God's rightful place in human life, which will result in a proper attitude towards oneself and others, as well as respect, moderation and humility towards the world of creatures (LS 204; Fiałkowski 2016).

### 3.2.6. Openness to the People Rejected by Society

It could be said that, in a way, St. Francis of Assisi formed himself among lepers at the beginning of his life's journey. The moment he abandoned his prejudices and fears and kissed a leper and then stayed among lepers, ministering to them, he defied certain stereotypes and rules that were prevalent at that time. Lepers were then an excluded and socially marginalised group. St. Francis of Assisi's attitude undoubtedly involved courage and a change of mindset. Furthermore, it also seems that his approach to the divisive and those contesting the Church was original and, in a sense, ahead of his time. St. Francis

of Assisi was not so much focused on fighting heresies of which there was no lack in the Church of his time, but he wanted to convert the erring to restore them to the Church.

This attitude is an expression of a particular openness to the rejected and marginalised, who became particularly close to Francis of Assisi and his followers. This was, in fact, the consequence of a courageous and complete reading of the teaching and deeds of Jesus Christ, who identified himself with the poor and the rejected (cf. Mt 25). The Minorites (Lesser Brothers) tended to settle “where the poor were most numerous and where conditions were most miserable, usually as close as possible to the walls on the inner side, or just outside the walls, in the so-called *borghi* (suburbs). The intention was well-thought-out and long preserved: the desire to be among those most in need of spiritual support and help, including material help from the Brothers” (Manselli 2006).

With greater freedom from things and from the exercise of authority, Franciscans were able to access all spheres of social life. This peculiar “Franciscan revolution” also brought greater apostolic effectiveness, paving the way for an evangelical message supported by the example of a life in conformity with the Gospel (Mariani 2006). As Pope Francis notes, St. Francis of Assisi showed a particular sensitivity not only to God’s creatures but, above all, to the poorest and the abandoned. As a mystic and a pilgrim, he lived with simplicity and in harmony with God, other people, nature and himself. His example shows us “to what degree of inseparability, concern for nature, justice for the poor, social commitment and inner peace are united” (LS 10).

This feature of Franciscan spirituality is clearly part of Pope Francis’ priority to care for the poor and excluded in the broadest sense, which is the implementation of God’s commandment of love and must be relevant to the needs of people who are affected by various forms of poverty. From the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis seems to have emphasised that God’s mercy is the central truth of the Christian message. This is a clear indication, which comes from the discernment of contemporary “signs of the times”, addressed to the Church, especially in the field of the formation of believers undertaken by her (Napiórkowski 2020).

#### 4. Conclusions

The message of Franciscan spirituality, which is still valid as it is re-read today and indicated by Pope Francis, appears as an interesting proposal for the formation of lay Catholics. Franciscan spirituality creates favourable conditions for the formation of Catholics who are faithful to the God they find in the Church. Such Catholics are, at the same time, aware of their own sinfulness and thus of the weakness of the Church, and yet they remain ready to take on their respective tasks in the Church and in the world. Both a good preparation for the apologia of one’s faith and a maturity that is not afraid of criticism are no less important in this respect.

The formation of lay Catholics, which is inspired by Franciscan spirituality, helps to form believers who are not afraid of the world and its dynamic development that inevitably brings changes and new challenges. These transformations rather mobilise these believers to read the “signs of the times” in an evangelical way and imbue the world with evangelical values. At the same time, such Catholics do not close their eyes to the evils and dangers of the world, but they are able to see signs of hope that come from the presence of God in such evils and dangers.

Nowadays, there is also a need for formation that teaches Catholics to be respectful of the legacy of their predecessors but also open to contemporary challenges. This involves having the courage to recognise and enter into the new paths that the Holy Spirit is showing the Church. It is necessary to be able to take joint action and be open to cooperation with everyone, including those who do not share our views. Today’s Church needs people who attach importance to their own development and undertake formation in the family, in the parish community, and in their work with other people.

Equally important is the ecumenical dimension of formation. The openness and dialogue that characterise Franciscan spirituality should become an important element in



the formation of lay Catholics. Cooperation with representatives of other Churches can result in getting to know each other and breaking down prejudices and stereotypes that exist on both sides. This serves to counteract the creation of closed and hostile environments, which is often a source of scorn and distancing from Christians in the modern world. Openness to other Churches gives mutual enrichment and strengthens the effort to proclaim the Gospel.

In the face of omnipresent consumerism and the tendency to reduce everything to material and horizontal dimensions only, formation in the proper use of material resources is an urgent task. It is about a Christian approach to wealth and possessions, treating them as necessary means rather than ends: ‘to have’ is to better ‘to be’. This excludes both the temptation to become too attached to or even enslaved by possessions and collected things but also rejects their disregard and contempt.

Franciscan spirituality can also inspire the courage to take up the new challenges facing the Church today. This particularly concerns a formation that will prepare Catholics who are capable of creatively responding to the challenge posed by the marginalised and excluded in the broadest sense, i.e., by the contemporary poor. It seems that formation in the Franciscan spirit has the potential to form people who will become, in this field, a sort of avant-garde that will open new paths for the Church and the world.

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## Abbreviations

ChL	Christifideles laici
EG	Evangelii gaudium
GeE	Gaudete et exsultate
LS	Laudato Si’
1 Reg	St. Francis. Rule not approved (by the papacy)

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