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JOHN PAUL II



*BEARING WITNESS TO CHRIST
IN SECULAR LIFE*

On the occasion of the International Symposium
to mark the 50th anniversary of
the Provida Mater Ecclesia

1.2.1997



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Your Eminence, venerable brothers and sisters,

1. I welcome you with great affection at this special audience to recall and celebrate an important date for Secular Institutes. I thank Cardinal Martinez Somalo for his words which shed the proper light on the meaning of this meeting, which gathers together in this hall countless people from all over the world. I also thank your representative who spoke after the Cardinal.

The Church's motherly concern and wise affection for her children who dedicate their life to Christ in the various forms of special consecration was expressed 50 years ago in the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia*, which was meant to give a new canonical structure to the Christian experience of Secular Institutes (cf. AAS 39, 1974, 114 124).

With good insight and anticipating several themes that were to be suitably formulated by the Second Vatican Council, Pius XII, my predecessor of venerable memory, confirmed with his apostolic authority a way and form of life that had already been attracting many Christians for a century, men and women committed to following Christ chaste, poor and obedient, while remaining in the state of life

proper to their own secular status. In this first phase of the history of Secular Institutes, it is beautiful to recognise the dedication and sacrifice of so many brothers and sisters in the faith, who fearlessly faced the challenges of new times. They offered a consistent witness of true Christian holiness in the most varied conditions of work, home and involvement in the social, economic and political life of the human communities to which they belonged.

We cannot forget the intelligent passion with which several great men of the Church accompanied this process in the years immediately preceding the promulgation of *Provida Mater Ecclesia*. Among the many, in addition to the Pope just mentioned, I like to remember with affection and gratitude the then Substitute of the Secretariat of State, the future Pope Paul VI, Mons. Giovanni Battista Montini, and the Undersecretary of the Congregation for Religious at the time of the Apostolic Constitution, venerable Cardinal Arcadio Larraona, who played an important role in elaborating and defining the doctrine and in making the canonical decisions this document contains.

2. Half a century later we still find *Provida Mater Ecclesia* very timely. You pointed this out during your international symposium's work. Indeed this document is marked by a prophetic inspiration which deserves to be emphasised. In fact, today more than ever, the way of life of Secular Institutes has proved a providential and effective form of Gospel witness in the specific circumstances of today's cultural and social conditions, in which the Church is called to live and carry out her mission. With the approval of these Institutes, crowning a spiritual endeavour which had been motivating Church life at least since the time of St Francis de Sales, the Constitution recognised that the perfection of Christian life could and should be lived in every circumstance and existential situation, since it is the call to universal holiness (cf. *Provida Mater Ecclesia*, n. 118). Consequently, it affirmed that religious life - understood in its proper canonical form - was not in itself the only way to follow the Lord without reserve. It desired that the Christian renewal of family, professional and social life would take place through the presence and witness of secular consecration, bringing about new

and effective forms of apostolate, addressed to persons and spheres normally far from the Gospel, where it is almost impossible for its proclamation to penetrate.

3. Years ago, in addressing those taking part in the Second International Congress of Secular Institutes, I said that they were "so to speak, at the centre of the conflict that disturbs and divides the modern soul" (Insegnamenti, vol. III/2, 1980, p.469; L'Osservatore Romano English edition, 29 September 1980, p. 4). With this statement I meant to re examine several considerations of my venerable predecessor, Paul VI, who had spoken of Secular Institutes as the answer to a deep concern: that of finding the way of combining the full consecration of life according to the evangelical counsels and full responsibility for a presence and transforming action within the world, to mould, perfect and sanctify it (cf. Insegnamenti di Paolo VI, vol. X, 1972, p. 102).

In fact, on the one hand we are witnessing the rapid spread of forms of religious expression offering fascinating experiences, which in some cases are exacting and demanding. The accent however is on the emotional and perceptible level of the experience, rather than the ascetical and spiritual. We can acknowledge that these forms of religious expression are an attempt to respond to a constantly renewed desire for communion with God, for the search for the ultimate truth about him and about humanity's destiny. They display the fascination of novelty and facile universalism. However these experiences imply an ambiguous concept of God which is far from that offered by Revelation. Furthermore, they prove to be detached from reality and humanity's concrete history.

This religious expression contrasts with a false concept of secularity in which God has nothing to do with the building of humanity's future. The relationship with him should be considered a private decision and a subjective question which at most can be tolerated as long as it does not claim to have any influence on culture or society.

4. How, then, should we face this terrible conflict which divides the heart and soul of contemporary humanity? It becomes a challenge for the Christian: the challenge to bring about a new synthesis of the greatest possible allegiance to God and his will, and the greatest possible sharing in the joys and hopes, worries and sorrows of the world, to direct them towards the plan of integral salvation which God the Father has shown us in Christ and continually makes available to us through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The members of Secular Institutes are committed precisely to this and express their full fidelity to the profession of the evangelical counsels in a form of secular life full of risks and often unforeseeable demands, but rich in a specific and original potential.

5. The humble yet daring bearers of the transforming power of God's kingdom and the courageous, consistent witnesses to the task and mission of the evangelization of cultures and peoples, the members of Secular Institutes, in history, are the sign of a Church which is the friend of men and can offer them comfort in every kind of affliction, ready to support all true progress in human life but at the same time intransigent towards every choice of death, violence, deceit and injustice. For Christians they are also a sign and a reminder of their duty, on God's behalf, to care for a creation which remains the object of its Creator's love and satisfaction, although marked by the contradictions of rebellion and sin and in need of being freed from corruption and death.

Is it surprising that the environment with which they have to contend is often little inclined to understand and accept their witness?

The Church today looks to men and women who are capable of a renewed witness to the Gospel and its radical demands, amid the living conditions of the majority of human beings. Even the world, often without realising it, wishes to meet the truth of the Gospel for humanity's true and integral progress, according to God's plan.

In such a condition, great determination and clear fidelity to the charism proper to their consecration is demanded of the members of Secular Institutes: that of bringing about the synthesis of faith and life, of the Gospel and human history, of total dedication to the glory of God and of unconditional willingness to serve the fullness of life of their brothers and sisters in this world.

Members of Secular Institutes are by their vocation and mission at the crossroads between God's initiative and the longing of creation: God's initiative, which they bring the world through love and intimate union with Christ; the longing of creation, which they share in the everyday, secular condition of their fellow men and women, bearing the contradictions and hopes of every human being, especially the weakest and the suffering.

Secular Institutes in any case are entrusted with the responsibility of reminding everyone of this mission, witnessing to it by a special consecration in the radicalness of the evangelical counsels, so that the whole Christian community may carry out with ever greater commitment the task that God, in Christ, has entrusted to it with the gift of his Spirit (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata*, nos. 17-22).

6. The contemporary world appears particularly sensitive to the witness of those who can courageously assume the risk and responsibility of discerning the times and of the plan for building a new and more just humanity. Our time is one of great cultural and social upheaval.

Thus it seems ever more apparent that the Christian mission in the world cannot be reduced to giving a pure, simple example of honesty, competence and fidelity to duty. All this is presupposed. It is a question of putting on the mind of Jesus Christ in order to be signs of his love in the world. This is the meaning and the goal of authentic Christian secularity, and thus the purpose and value of the Christian consecration lived in Secular Institutes.

In this regard, it is all the more important that members of Secular Institutes intensely live fraternal communion within their own Institute and with the members of different Institutes.

Precisely because they are dispersed like leaven and salt in the midst of the world, they should consider themselves privileged witnesses to the value of brotherhood and Christian friendship, so necessary today, especially in the great urban areas where the majority of the world's population now lives. I hope that each Secular Institute may become this burning hearth from which many men and women can draw light and warmth for the life of the world.

7. Lastly, I ask Mary to bestow on all the members of Secular Institutes the clearness of her vision of the world's situation, the depth of her faith in the word of God and the promptness of her willingness to fulfil his mysterious designs for an ever more effective collaboration in the work of salvation.

Entrusting to her motherly hands the future of Secular Institutes, a chosen portion of God's people, I impart my Apostolic Blessing to each one of you present here, and I willingly extend it to all the members of Secular Institutes scattered throughout the five continents.