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JOHN PAUL II



*TO CHANGE THE WORLD  
FROM THE INSIDE*

Discourse to the 2nd International  
Congress of Secular Institutes

(8.28.1980)



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## TO CHANGE THE WORLD FROM THE INSIDE

### Discourse to the 2nd International Congress of Secular Institutes

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Dear brothers and sisters in the Lord,

1. *"Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ"*. These words, so frequently on the lips of the Apostle St. Paul, rise unbidden to my lips as I bid you welcome and thank you for coming to see me on this occasion of your Congress, this gathering of representatives of all the world's Secular Institutes.

2. Meeting you here today does stir me deeply. Your state of consecrated life is a special gift of the Holy Spirit given to our times to help us, as my Latin American confreres put it at Puebla, *"to cope with the tension between objective openness to the values of the modern world (the authentic secular Christian attitude) and the complete and unreserved gift of the heart to God (spirit of consecration)"* (cf. Final Document of the Puebla Assembly, n. 775). You actually live in the thick of the fight, the conflict which stirs and sunders men's souls today. That is why you can give *"a really helping hand in forward looking pastoral work. You can open new roads, roads which are right for all men and women of the people of God throughout the world"* (ibid.). So your Congress grips my mind. I pray the Lord to give you light and grace so that the work you are putting in may enable you to see quite clearly and in detail the chances and the risks of your state of life and to make decisions

which will guarantee the right kind of development for this way of life of which today's Church has great expectations.

3. The theme of your Congress, "*Evangelization and Secular Institutes*", takes up a suggestion made by my venerable Predecessor, Pope Paul VI, in one of his discourses. For Pope Paul your hearts must be full of gratitude. He thought a lot of you. He had the practical wisdom needed to have the idea and reality of consecration in secular life accepted by the Church.

4. Speaking to Heads of Institutes on August 25th, 1976, he said: "*If they remain faithful to their special vocation Secular Institutes will become the Church's experimental laboratory for the acid test of its adaptations in dealing with the world. That is why they must listen to the appeal of Evangelii nuntiandi as addressed to them, to them above all: Their primary and immediate task is not to establish and develop the ecclesial community this is the specific role of the pastors but to put to use every Christian and evangelical possibility latent but already present and active in the affairs of the world. 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 (no. 70)*".

5. The emphasis these words put upon the ecclesial reality of Secular Institutes, both in what they are and in what they do, is obvious. Pope Paul enlarged upon the theme on other similar occasions.

6. There is an aspect of this, obvious enough in itself, that I would like to emphasize namely, how important it is that the life you live in this way, characterized and unified by consecration, apostolate and secularity, should be not only genuinely pluralistic that goes without saying but also a life of authentic communion with the pastors of the Church and a participation in the evangelizing mission of all the people of God.

7. I may add that this in no way detracts from the distinctive character of your consecration to Christ. My Predecessor made this point too in the Discourse I have just quoted and he called your attention to a point on which it is important to have clear ideas if you are to go about things in the right way. *"This does not mean", he said, "that the Institutes as such must take these tasks upon themselves. Such commitment is normally personal, a matter for individual members. The duty of Institutes as such is to shape the conscience of their members and bring it to a maturity and openness that will make them work in real earnest to qualify in their chosen professions and cope successfully, in evangelical detachment of spirit, with the burdens and the joys of the social responsibilities they assume towards those to whom God's providence sends them."*

8. In various ways during the past few years your Institutes at national and continental level have followed these guidelines and delved into the theology of evangelization.

Your present meeting is being held to see where you stand and assess the results. You want to help each individual to check his route more accurately in accord with the living Church which is *"seeking by every means to study how we can bring the Christian message to modern man. For it is only in the Christian message that modern man can find the answer to his questions and the energy for his commitment of human solidarity"* (Evangelii nuntiandi, N. 3).

9. In these matters lay people have duties which are their own and no one else's, as I have said and repeated and stressed times without number, and of course this is just what the Council teaches. I said, for instance, at Limerick during my pilgrimage in Ireland: *"As people of God you are called to play your part in the evangelization of the modern world. Yes, lay people are 'a chosen race, a holy priesthood'. They too are called to be 'the salt of the earth and the light of the world'. It is their vocation and their proper mission to show the Gospel in their life and to put it like leaven into the world of today, the world in which they live and work."*

10. *Among the great forces which rule the world politics, mass media, science, technology, culture, education, industry, organized labor this is exactly where lay people are specialized missionaries working on their own ground. If these forces are directed by people who are true disciples of Christ and competent by know how and talent in their own fields, then the world will really be changed from within by the redemptive power of Christ"* (Limerick, Oct.1st, 1979).

11. Taking up these thoughts again and going a little deeper into them, I must ask you to consider three conditions of fundamental importance for effective mission:

a) You must be above all disciples of Christ. As members of Secular Institutes you want truly to be his disciples by means of a commitment which goes to the very roots, the following of the evangelical counsels. You do this in a way that does not change your condition you are and you remain lay people, and this is very important but actually confirms and strengthens it. Your secular condition is now consecrated. It requires more of you. Your commitment in the world and for the world, which goes with your secular condition, is steady and permanent. Let this sink in. The special consecration which brings the consecration of your baptism and confirmation to the full height of potentiality, must impregnate your whole life and all your daily activities. It must create in you a complete availability to the will of the Father who has placed you in the world for the world. In this way your consecration will become a kind of interior touchstone for your secular life. You will not be in danger of taking life in the world to be just living in the world, gaily assuming that everything is going to be all right. You will never lose sight of the inevitable double meaning of "secular life". You will always be conscious of your commitment to discern the good things and the bad, veering all the time towards the one (clearly seen by that discerning power of your consecration) and progressively eliminating the other.

12. b) The second condition refers to the practical wisdom gained by experience, and the know how, your competence in this your

own field of work. Here too you need to be up to the mark if you are to carry out, from your vantage point of actual presence in the world, the apostolate of witness and of commitment to every man, as required by your consecration and your Catholic life. Without this competence you will just not be able to put into effect the advice given by the Council to Secular Institutes: "*They should make a total dedication of themselves to God in perfect charity their chief aim, and the Institutes themselves should preserve their own proper, i.e. secular character, so that they may be able to carry out effectively everywhere in and, as it were, from the world the apostolate for which they were founded*" (Perfectae caritatis).

13. c) The third condition which I ask you to think over is the resolve in your hearts, hallmark of your condition as Secular Institute members, to change the world from the inside. You are in the world, but not just in the social sense, classified as secular, but put there, personally, every bit of you. Being there must be a thing of the heart, what you really mean and want. So you must consider yourselves part of the world, committed to the sanctification of the world, with full acceptance of its rights, its claims upon you, claims inseparable from the autonomy of the world, of its values. of its laws.

14. This means that you must give full weight in your minds to the natural order of things (very real and tangible philosophers sometimes talk of its "*ontological density*"). It means trying to see God's plan in the whole thing, the design he has chosen to trace out, and offering your collaboration in the progressive fulfillment of it as history unfolds. Your faith shows you the higher destiny which can enter into this history through Christ who made the first step in our direction, to become our Savior.

15. But divine revelation does not provide us with ready made answers to the many questions which you come up against, once you have really committed yourself to this life. You must seek, in the light of faith, adequate solutions for the practical problems which will come up from time to time; often enough you will have to take the risk of a solution which is no more than probable.

16. So you have undertaken to lend a hand in the world's progress. But there is another commitment. Faith must come into it with its own set of values. The two commitments are to become one, to blend harmoniously as integral parts of your life. Both are fundamental and they set the course you follow and guide every step on your way. If you do this you will be able to help in changing the world from within, becoming life giving leaven, fulfilling the duty laid upon you by Pope Pius XII in *Primo feliciter*: to be *"the little yeast, always and everywhere at work, kneaded into every kind of society, from the humblest to the highest, to permeate each and all by word, by example and in every way until it forms and shapes the whole of it, making of it a new paste in Christ."* (Introduction)

17. Thank you for bringing your good work to my attention. You have all my encouragement and support, all of you, priests and lay people. Persevere in your efforts to widen and deepen your understanding of temporal realities and values as they are related to evangelization: you priests, so that you may become increasingly concerned with the situation of people in the world and contribute to the diocesan clergy not only your personal experience of a life of commitment to the evangelical counsels, helped by a degree of common life, but also a fine sense of the true relation between the Church and the world; you lay people, so that you may gladly accept the special part given to you, consecrated in lay life in the service of evangelization.

18. I have been high lighting the special contribution of your lifestyle. This must not lead you to underrate other forms of consecration for the sake of the Kingdom, forms to which you too may be called. I refer to N. 73 of *Evangelii nuntiandi* where we are reminded that *"the laity can also feel themselves called, or be called, to work with their pastors in the service of the ecclesial community, for its growth and life, by exercising a great variety of ministries according to the grace and charisms which the Lord is pleased to give them."* This is no novelty, it is of a piece with very ancient traditions in the Church. It makes practical sense for some Institute members, especially, though not exclusively, those who live in the communities of Latin America and other Third World countries.

19. Dear sons and daughters, your field of action is, as you can see for yourselves, really vast. The Church expects a great deal of you. The Church needs your witness in giving to the world, hungering, whether consciously or not, after God's Word, the *"tidings of great joy"*, the news that every truly human aspiration can find fulfillment in Jesus Christ. You must learn to rise to the occasion, the opportunities that Divine Providence is offering to you in these days, as the second millenium of Christianity draws to a close.

20. As for me, I beg the Lord once more, through the motherly intercession of the Virgin Mary, to give you in abundance his gifts of light, wisdom, determination, in your search after better ways of becoming, in the midst of your brothers and sisters in the world, a living witness to Christ and a quiet but compelling invitation to welcome his newness, each one in his or her own life and all together in the structures of society.

21. May the love of the Lord guide your reflections and discussions during this Congress. Then you can go forward with confidence. That is what I encourage you to do as I give, to you and to all those whom you represent, the Apostolic Blessing.