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CONGREGATION FOR RELIGIOUS AND
SECULAR INSTITUTES (C.R.I.S.)

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EVANGELICAL COUNSELS

Reflections on the basic teaching
of the Church's Magisterium

May 15th, 1981



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The most painstaking activity that has to be undertaken by the "*Secular Institute*" Section of the Sacred Congregation is its examination of the Constitutions or Statutes, a task it absolves with the collaboration of its Consultors and Commissaries under the ultimate responsibility of the Cardinal Prefect and the Secretary.

This is not a purely technical task for which one has to do no more than apply some ready made scheme according to which the various norms can be approved or corrected.

Nor is the Section an anonymous group. Rather, its members, just like the Consultors and Commissaries, are personally called upon to render an ecclesial service, and they desire to render this service in love for Christ, the Church, and the people affected. This requires of them an effort of comprehension and a commitment of fidelity, both of which have to be continually renewed.

From the documentation it receives (and whenever possible also from a direct dialogue) the Section tries to understand, at least in its essence if not in all its nuances, the spirituality, the history and the characteristic elements of every Institute. In performing its task as

an executive organ, however, the Section must take account of the Church's doctrine regarding the Secular Institutes, a doctrine that it must interpret, perfect and apply without betraying it (cfr. PM, Art. II, 2.2°).

It is in this spirit, therefore, that the Section for Secular Institutes, in order to clarify certain difficulties regarding the observance of the evangelical counsels, has made a serious study of its plan for the examination of Constitutions and Statutes. Following an initial analysis with its Consultors, the Section presents the results of its study in the conviction of providing something not necessarily new in content but useful and normative in drawing up or revising Constitutions, as well as a basis for common language in the dialogue between Institutes and the Section.

I. The novelty and the peculiar feature that the Secular Institutes constitute in the Church was and still is the Church's recognition of true consecration in secularity.

The Magisterium of the Church, by its own authority, recognises as Institutes of true consecrated life not only the religious Institutes, but also those associations that, called to an apostolate "in saeculo et ex saeculo", propose to their members as the way towards the fullness of charity (or using equivalent expressions: towards the perfection of Christian life; towards a full and authentic evangelical life) an explicit commitment on the basis of sacred bond to observe the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience in the world, in secular life. These associations it has called Secular Institutes.

In this connection see Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater* of 1947, the *Motu proprio Primo feliciter* of 1948, and the confirmation contained in No. 11 of the Council Decree *Perfectae caritatis* of 1965. These texts must today be read in the light of the teachings of Paul VI and John Paul II contained in their speeches to the Secular Institutes.

The recognition of true consecration in secularity is restated, and in substantially the same terms, in the scheme of the future Code of canon law.

2. Three components concur in the reality of this peculiar consecration: God's action that calls to a specific commitment and a specific mission, the response of the person with total donation, and the recognition by the Church.

It is not the same as the consecration of baptism, but derives its origin and value from this latter, of which it is a development in depth in accordance with specific vocation: *"in baptismatis consecratione intime radicatur eamque plenius exprimit* (PC 5; cfr. LG 44: *"intimius consecratur"*).

3. On the basis of the recognition by the Magisterium, the community of the Institute comes to belong to the Church by virtue of a special title.

As far as individual persons are concerned, ecclesial recognition offers the guarantee that the way proposed by the Institute is an evangelical way that leads to the fullness of charity, always provided that it is followed with fidelity and generosity. The fact that on the basis of this recognition the total and definitive donation of the members to Christ is received by the Director General of the Institute in the name of the Church provides a guarantee also of the new gift of grace that is conveyed by this peculiar consecration.

We are dealing here with a positive recognition. In other words, it obviously does not exclude that there may be other roads towards the fullness of charity in secular life: *"All Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and the perfection of love"* (LG 40). The sacrament of marriage, for example, is given for this purpose. But the Magisterium recognises as Secular Institutes those that propose, in secularity of course, the road of an explicit commitment to observe the three evangelical counsels.

4. The road proposed by the Secular Institutes is a peculiar and characteristic road.

It is a lay road (for the lay Secular Institutes) that is specified by a special consecration. In fact, the secular character 'proper and peculiar to the laity' (LG 31) is also *"the proper and special character of these Institutes, which constitutes their whole reason for existence"* (PF II).

The consecration that specifies this lay road involves an explicit commitment to observe the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience, but with peculiar content and with a peculiar style.

Many evangelical counsels are given to all Christians; the road proposed by the Secular Institutes requires a special commitment to observe the three counsels in accordance with definite norms.

In fact, every road leading to fullness of charity requires that one should embrace the Gospel in its entirety as expressed by the Beatitudes. The three typical evangelical counsels in the doctrine of the Church are the ultimate consequence and the programmatic quintessence of all the evangelical counsels and the Beatitudes; they are an expression of the radicality with which the Gospel must be lived in order *"to follow Christ with greater liberty and to imitate him more closely (= pressius)"* (PC I). It is on account of the value of this radicality that the Magisterium requires the Secular Institutes to commit themselves explicitly to the evangelical counsels, *"gift of God which the Church has received from her Lord and which by his grace she always safeguards"* (LG 43).

Even in the case of Secular Institutes for priests one has to speak of a peculiar consecration, a consecration that in turn specifies the life of the priest and involves the same explicit commitment to observe the evangelical counsels.

5. An eminent expression of one's total donation to God is the vow of perfect chastity in celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom: *"precious gift of divine grace given to some by the Father"* (LG 42).

Sometimes the Church limits herself to requiring this particular vow before giving her recognition to a consecration; this, for example, is what happens in the case of the consecratio virginum. But in the case of the institutional forms of consecrated life, and specifically as far as the Secular Institutes are concerned, she requires that the donation should also be expressed by an explicit commitment to poverty and obedience according to certain norms.

6. The Magisterium of the Church, which has the task of "making wise laws for the regulation of the practice of the counsels whereby perfect love of God and of our neighbour is fostered in a unique way"

(LG 45), leaves it to the Constitutions of the individual Institutes to draw up the appropriate directives. What she requires is:

a) that the call and the exhortation to fully live the spirit of the evangelical counsels should be supplemented by concrete and precise norm directing how this is to be done in the style of secularity and in keeping with the characteristics of the Institute; these norms in a certain way become the means and the guarantee for living the corresponding evangelical virtues;

b) that these prescribed obligations be accepted by means of a sacred bond, i.e. that the commitment be expressed before God and the Church (cfr. PM Art. III. 2);

c) that the Constitutions with these contents be submitted for verification and approval to the ecclesiastical Authorities.

For the purposes of these reflections the Section has taken into consideration what the Magisterium of the Church says today about the Secular Institutes as far as this particular topic is concerned. No effort was made to define the nature of the Secular Institutes in its entirety, nor to reflect about consecrated life in general, nor to contemplate the possibility that in the future there might be forms of consecration in full secular life different from the one now practised by Secular Institutes.

A very important point remains to be examined: the exemplification of concrete ways of living the evangelical counsels to correspond with the exigencies of secularity. The Section intends to make a further study of this matter; but it is really up to the members of Secular Institutes in the light of their experience to make a decisive contribution on this subject. The Section will in any case be extremely grateful to any Institute that would care to send in a written statement on this topic.