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

FORMATION IN SECULAR  
INSTITUTES

*April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1980*



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

## FORMATION IN SECULAR INSTITUTES <sup>1\*</sup>

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### PRESENTATION

1. In proposing these pages on formation, we should point out that they are offered simply as an aid to the Secular Institutes. In no way are they meant to be a normative directory.

2. In December, 1978, the Sacred Congregation of Religious and Secular Institutes sent to all Secular Institutes the result of a study on formation made in some constitution texts, together with a questionnaire. The answers received<sup>2</sup> were then studied, the greater number accepting the study as satisfactory. Hence, the aid here presented has retained substantially the same structure, corrected, amplified and clarified according to suggestions received. Whatever could be included has been taken from those answers that were less in accord with this statement, but not material that would have demanded radical rewriting: either because they also recognised the validity of the preceding study or because the material would have otherwise been too voluminous.

3. Thus, also, we did not take up some certainly essential points, more particularly stressed by one Institute or another derived from its specific charism and experience, but varying from Institute to Institute.

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1. \* The original text is in Italian.

2. 57 answers were received; 54 from the Institutes, 3 from Consultors, but other Consultors answered in the name of the Institute. Among the answers 51 kept more or less to the questionnaire; 4 were more spontaneous, 2 said they had nothing to say. Breakup in languages: 25 Italian; 13 French; 8 Spanish; 8 German, 2 English; 1 Portuguese. Material gathered made up about 220 typed pages.

4. From what has been said, the limitations of these pages will already be evident. It is worth noting that we are still dealing mainly with principles; they are repeated here, however, in the belief that they derive from concrete experiences and needs, and deserve to be put into effect in actual practice. Thus these pages are inspired with the hope that the Institutes will feel spurred on to concern themselves with formation and also to note and communicate their positive experiences so that they will be of practical use and shared in common.

## I. CHRISTIAN LIFE AND PARTICULAR VOCATIONS

5. Christian life, being theological, demands that all baptised persons be committed to the perfection of charity, according to personal vocation, within the ecclesial community.

6. The basis and aim of this growth is Jesus Christ: *“so that Christ be formed in you”* (Gal 4,19) so that *“the great love the Father has given us, reach its perfection in us”* (Jn 3,1 and 4,17); the principal agent and guide is the Holy Spirit: *“He will lead you to the whole truth”* (Jn 16,13); the milieu is the Church, body of Christ; essential food and support are the sacraments and the Word of God.

7. Within this vision which is universally valid and always very demanding, we have to speak of growth according to the various vocations. with their own specific features.

8. The vocation to consecration in secularity requires precisely that account be taken of its theological content, of the position in the People of God and in society of persons called to this way of life as also of the organization of the Institutes.

## II. MAIN PROBLEMS

9. In the experience of Secular Institutes formation has to face a series of problems that can be summed up as follows:

### A. General problems

These derive from:

10. 1. everincreasing rapidity of change in society at all levels, the pace of living that results, with predominant atmosphere of superficiality, difficulty in getting hold of the signs of the times and discerning value priorities;

11. 2. identity crisis that has shaken the Catholic world in recent years phenomena of secularisation and horizontalism; the proximity of multiple cultures and life models; a certain confusion in the field of theology; diminution of the "*sensus Ecclesiae*" and influx of contrasting currents within the Church herself; lack of sufficiently solid Christian and doctrinal formation among youth, deriving from the crisis in traditional education patterns.

### B. Problems relating more specifically to the Secular Institutes

These concern:

12. 1. the very nature of vocation to these Institutes, which demands continuous effort to synthesise faith, consecration and secular life; which would facilitate actualisation of a typically secular mission, accepting wholly the evangelical requirements of consecration to God:

13. 2. the situation of persons normally employed in secular tasks and activities: with problems of time, balance between various activities, change of place; all accentuated if we take into account that they concern the formation personnel themselves, who are also employees or professional people;

14. 3.--the ecclesial milieu in which the Secular Institutes function: this vocation is often misunderstood by the community and even priests (so that suitable spiritual direction is frequently hard to come by); and on the operative level, also very important for formation, the specific charism of these Institutes is often not perceived and valued as complementary and coresponsible with other gifts in the Church.

15. This list of problems could be more detailed, and certainly, in some Institutes, for their own reasons they are accentuated. For example, international Institutes have the difficulty of the duty of respecting and assuming cultural values within which the charism of the Institute must become incarnate.

16. Nevertheless, this synthesis is enough to call attention, if it were necessary, to the formation task in the Secular Institutes.

### III. BASIC PRINCIPLES

#### A. Ultimate aim

17. To be of real help for a person to respond to her vocation and mission in the world, according to God's project, Secular Institute formation should encourage integral and unified development of the person according to capacities and conditions.

18. This is not easy because of the tendency to separate natural from supernatural realities, while they should be considered equally. Hence, it requires sufficient knowledge of the person, by both the subject herself and the formation personnel not merely with regard to spiritual gifts and growth in faith, but also the human aspects of intelligence, openness, sensibility, balance, affective and moral maturity, capacity for independent living, commitment, etc.

19. In fact, though, supernatural values which should be the ones to assure the sought-for unity, escape to a great extent from our

action. Consequently, formation should give firstly, basic education in prayer and faith, that is, personal contact with God, manifested by faithful adherence to him at every moment of the day, enriched by the presence of our fellowmen and the whole of creation. This living and constant relationship supposes formation to fidelity to more intense moments of prayer, vigilance to live in communion with God in the very act of communion with men. Then prayer helps to patient selfacceptance and acquiescence to life conditions, thus helping balance and solid growth.

20. Formation then becomes what in fact it should be: a human contribution to the invisible work of grace, to guide the person to indispensable collaboration with the main agent of formation, the Holy Spirit.

21. In this matter also, the Blessed Virgin is exemplary, and she becomes the *“inspiring model”* (Paul VI): she who always consented to the divine word and will and *“consecrated herself totally to the person and work of her Son”*, who *“went forward on the pilgrimage of faith and faithfully guarded her union with her Son till the Cross”* (LG 56 and 58).

## B. Basic Characteristics

22. The common vocation of those who belong to the same Institute demands elements of content, method in formation that are shared by all. But God calls us by name: even in its communication, the vocation is a personal one. Under these aspects formation is necessarily personal:

1. it should be actively willed and assumed by the person in formation, who should take on the responsibility of continuous striving for development in the light of God. Formation received passively would be ineffective.

23. 2. it should take into account the personality of the individual, that is, all her gifts and limitations, besides the stage she has reached through formation received or previously lacking.

24. 3. finally, it should take into account the “*locus*” of formation, that is, the concrete situation of the person to be formed; it matters very much that she be helped to realise her personal vocation, which expresses the specific Institute vocation in her life context and her relationship with others.

25. Hence, formation should be personal and integrated community wise: the growth of the person also depends on being able, in the various sectors of life, to enter into deep relationship with others, and the development of a sense of fraternity and authentic communion within the Institute that is united in Christ.

### C. Areas

26. Formation must include all areas of life, even if the Institute does not contribute equally to each of these. In fact, some, technically speaking, escape its direct competence (professional, political, trade union fields) while on the other hand, seculars possess outside the Institute, various possibilities of formation under less technical aspects.

27. It could be asked whether the Institute’s area of competence should not be restricted in formation, to transmission of the specific vocation and what concerns the charism. Or if it has not above all the obligation to supply a solid basic formation that would make up for the lack of one so often deplored in candidates.

28. But while taking these two aspects into account, it is necessary to help individuals, directly or indirectly, to acquire the personal formation they need to respond to the call of the Institute and carry out their own mission. One duty of the formation personnel will be to discern where formation is still necessary, what lacunas

need to be filled up and where aggiornamento is urgent and vital. Meanwhile, the start should be from each one's concrete reality: her personal basic formation, social and professional duties, the possibilities of her milieu; after which should be offered first what is proper to the Institute, pointing out exterior means of formation, but also supplying on the Institute level, as far as possible, what cannot be found outside, while seeing to the co-ordination of the various elements so as to bring about in every subject the desired unity.

## D. Particular aspects

29. Aspects and areas of formation may be dealt with separately, which does not mean separation, because they often cut across and overlay each other. To treat of each one by itself only means to bring out its essential contents.

### 1. Spiritual Formation

30. Under this aspect is included the basic demands of grace or the life of faith, for persons consecrated to God in the world. These demands each one should make her own in order to be inwardly renewed, to live concretely according to the evangelical counsels, to give herself entirely to God and men, in fidelity to the calling to secular consecration within her own Institute.

31. Because of the lack of spiritual training in young people who ask to enter the Institute, their formation must be very concrete; it should teach to live according to the evangelical counsels through gestures and attitudes of donation to God and in the service of men, helping towards a perception of the presence of God in the history of our times and each individual's personal history, and learning to live accepting the cross.



32. In such a way general spiritual formation enters into, and becomes specified according to the charism of the Institute and its spirituality. Elements that are repeated, though with varying intensity, are:

- formation to prayer and living in God's presence;
- deepening of baptismal life in the specific consecration, practice of the theological virtues and adult faith so that the whole being belongs to God;
- listening to the Word of God, individually or in common, in obedient meditation;
- deepening of the "*sensus Ecclesiae*" with awareness that through consecration the entire person is given to the Church and shares in her mission;
- formation that enables the person to carry spiritual values into every human situation.

## 2. Doctrinal formation: biblical and theological

33. Spiritual formation requires a doctrinal support, that is, study of the Bible and the teaching of the Church.

34. Holy Scripture is not only for the learned, certainly; but it is impossible to read it as the Word of God unless we take it seriously enough to study and understand it according to our capacities. The work of the Spirit in us is not impeded but rather facilitated by sustained studious efforts to open the listening spirit and heart. This biblical doctrinal study should extend to the whole of Scripture, but in any case at least the New Testament especially the Gospels.

35. The same holds for the teaching of the Church: to know and understand the Council documents, the Magisterium of the Pope and bishops, living more conscious of the faith and being more completely integrated in the ecclesial community.

36. Today, opportunities for biblical and theological studies in the various dioceses are not hard to find. The Institute should see that it profits by these possibilities, at the same time, envisaging completing studies of the teaching of the Church on Secular Institutes.

### 3. Psychological, moral and ascetical formation

37. This aspect of formation is not so much theoretical as to enable the person in formation to understand herself and her milieu and foresee the problems awaiting her. For the formation of a mature, responsible and humanly rich personality there should be a search for balance, self control and openness to others: all this leading to better correspondence with grace through continual effort at selfconversion and revision of living witness.

38. Corresponding with the intellectual aspect should go self-formation, where will come in abnegation and mortification behind Christ carrying his cross.

### 4. Formation to the secular apostolate

39. Work and professional activity and every type of presence in society must become means of personal sanctification and ways of inserting Christian values, above all charity, into a world to be sanctified from within.

40. Hence stress should be laid on the importance of members of the Institute keeping up to the changing world and Church, opening out wide horizons, and assuming with courage their own responsibilities; the urgency of forming them to grasp the “changes of attitude and structures” as they come, and “to understand ways of thinking and feeling” of the men of today so as to be able to “test and interpret all things in a truly Christian spirit” (GS 7 and 62).

41. The Institute has therefore the task of encouraging formation to secularity (the secular outlook), understood not only as a social condition but a value that is part of the lifestyle, entering into the practice of the evangelical counsels and the carrying out of the apostolic task.

42. It is a formation to the mission as participation in the evangelising and sanctifying mission of the Church in the world; to an apostolate of presence and witness in the milieu and professional life; to a witness, too, when, for various reasons (illness, age, etc), participation in the building up of the kingdom is limited to one's daily life; as also to a visible and more direct apostolate demanded of the conscious and committed Christian. One whose particular vocation brings with it the urgency of proclaiming Christ and the love of the Father, and who knows how to make herself available for this end to the ecclesial community.

43. In short: formation to secularity that is a way of living specified by being in the world and for the world. At the same time, formation to courage, apostolic boldness and the will to be better prepared and not to yield to human respect.

## 5. Professional formation

44. We have already said that the Institute as such is not competent to intervene directly on the professional level. Nevertheless, it must see that competence is had in this field on which depends witnessing value.

45. It is, then, essential that the Institute draws the attention of the members to their duty to acquire the highest professional competence; to maintain suitable relationships with their work milieu and to be prepared to make valid choices in the cultural, social, political and trade union areas. These are, in fact, indispensable conditions for having an impact on a world in which culture and technical skill are at a premium and where only too frequently professional sense of responsibility is lacking.

46. Need for professional competence should be looked on as an authentic service to the world, in line with the specific Secular Institute Vocation

## E. Line of unification

47. These various aspects of formation, particularly in what concerns spirituality and the apostolate, have their line of unification in the constitutions of each Institute, in so far as they are the concrete project of the vocation and contain the radical lines of the spiritual physiognomy of a person called to this vocation.

48. Constitutions that have been renewed since Vatican II have been enriched with both biblical and doctrinal theology, with ascetical sections and stimuli. If a member of a Secular Institute is formed on this basis, this formation will be complete in essentials, besides its validity being guaranteed by the Church's approval.

49. It is fundamental that an adult relationship, free with the freedom of the children of God, should exist between the person and the constitutions: the members must know and understand what they are saying; they must be in an attitude of such readiness that they read in them the truth calling them to generous action.

50. This relationship is, clearly, not limited to the period of first formation, when what the Institute seeks and offers must be well grasped. The constitutions read in the light of the Gospel and ecclesial documents, provide matter for study and revision that is permanently valid for growth in Christian maturity.

## F. Formation periods

51. Formation should be systematic in the early period of life in the Institute but cannot be limited to this; the outline becomes ever clearer as choices become more precise, that is, throughout life.

52. All the elements described hold for first, as for ongoing formation, only the stress is different. Formation to the specific

Institute charism of spirituality, which has priority at the start, must go on, because in the concrete living, the charism and spirituality have their own evolution, depending on times, places, Church directives and needs of the world. Intelligent evolution that requires continual formation.

53. The specific work of ongoing formation has many facets: it makes up for inevitable gaps in first formation; is an indispensable help to continuous *aggiornamento*, discerning authentic values and providing enlightened reading of the signs of the times; helps to rise above periods of fatigue due to intense living, isolation, age or other circumstances; sustains the constant effort for spiritual renewal when the first fervour is falling away, could lead to less fidelity; focuses attention on fresh demands of apostolic presence.

54. Between the period of first formation and what follows there might be a gap that could give rise to a crisis. The initial period is marked by the normal presence of a responsible guide devoting time to interpersonal relationships and formation meetings; later on this may be lacking or very scarce and the physical community does not replace it. It is useful to prepare for this solitude through experience of independence and personal responsibility.

## G. Formation personnel

55. It is therefore of extreme importance to make a careful choice of formation personnel possessing the necessary qualities. Attention should be paid to spiritual gifts, rootedness in the Institute, balance, capacity for discernment, listening, respect and understanding of persons.

56. There is also need to give a specific formation to the formation personnel, which in one sense is the same as that of all the other members, but in another is distinct. For example, the formation personnel should not only know the Gospel but also the pedagogical techniques by which it may be transmitted; they should know and live the constitutions of the Institute in such a way as to be able to communicate all their riches, know and also be capable of

inventing various possible ways of living them and making them live. Besides elements of psychology indispensable for dealing with life situations, the personnel needs the capacity for judging situations so as to provide warnings required by the vocation and consecration in a Secular Institute for a particular person in a particular instance.

## IV. MEANS OF FORMATION

### A. Formation planning

57. Planned formation is necessary even if it has to be sufficiently flexible to adapt to needs of persons and circumstances of time and place. Such a plan should be based on the Word of God, the Magisterium and the Constitutions, making use in its project of many contributions and be the fruit of reflection and experience.

58. Graded according to periods of formation, this plan should have a clear aim, but be very open as regards application, because it must be in function of persons. In international Institutes it is desirable that formation plans take into account the various cultural areas as long as the main lines of formation maintain unity of spirit and the specific vocation of the Institute. Once more it becomes clear that the use and deep study of the constitutions is essential in any formative plan.

### B. Means of spiritual formation

59. Given the primary importance of spiritual formation, the means must be explicitly studied and explained.

60. A list might include: spiritual exercises, periodical retreats, liturgy and the sacraments, personal and communitarian listening to the Word of God, daily meditation, sharing faith sessions, reflection alone or together, on the constitutions. All these means of spiritual formation, directly used by the Institute or being a part of the milieu where the members live, do not exclude the fact that each one

should feel himself personally and actively responsible for the way he makes them his own.

### C. Contacts with the Institute

61. Contacts with the Institute may be many, all directed towards integral and unified formation: from exchanges between individuals or to a group or communication “ from afar”.

62. 1. Among person to person contacts, priority is given to those between members in formation and the formation personnel: help is there given to assume the various elements of the vocation responsibly and in line with personal gifts, thus making a lifelong harmonious synthesis.

63. There can be periodical colloquies, written relations and regular correspondence. It is good that the formation' personnel does not limit its action to these, but tries to meet the member in formation in the milieu of his ordinary everyday life. This will make his milieu of origin better known, the particular aspects of his personality accepted and will show how he relates to real life and to others. There are particular moments when the individual is helped to discover, reinforce, develop and deepen his sense of commitment and personal responsibility.

64. Besides contacts with the formation personnel, it is particularly important that the member in formation have fraternal contact with every other member of the Institute.

65. 2. But individual contact is not enough. This must be completed with times of community life, that is, those fraternal meetings indispensable for specific formation in the Institute and the verification of mutual support.

66. These moments of fraternal life may vary notably from one Institute to the other, but their formative efficacy is undeniable. They not only show human friendship but should, above all, be a time of confrontation with the Word of God, to incarnate it in the different

but shared concrete situations. In fact, the value of dialogue, whether bilateral or on the level of the group, lies in the common search for the will of God, in reciprocal sharing.

67. At these meetings there is also the transmission of the history of the Institute (charism, foundation, first steps, developments, etc), the knowledge of which is fundamental for understanding the personal vocation and its place in the mission of the Church.

68. 3. At times, possibilities of fraternal meetings comes up against difficulties; hence the need to take into consideration written means, even if oral formation is preferable.

69. Among these instruments of formation may be listed all the Institute writings: letters, circulars, bulletins, questionnaires, reviews, etc, used according to the traditions of the Institute, but to which the members as far as they can, should contribute; and above all which should be received as a means of fraternal support.

## D. Complementary means of formation

70. Is there a hierarchy of efficiency of means of formation useful to the Institutes?

71. In practice, the Institutes have to make use of different means in a complementary way, suited to the individual and actual possibilities. In this sense it can be said that all means are necessary and complement each other, in relation to the essential and permanent aim of personal growth.

72. A few suggestions for facing certain difficulties may be useful:

- the remedy for isolation is the forming of groups: mutual help guarantees that there will always be a stimulus for progress in self-formation as well;

- it can be very useful to share formation in common elements and demands between Institutes;

- fraternal help between the better provided Institutes and those less gifted might also be considered.



## CONCLUSION

73. The above reflections and the suggestions of the previous pages are offered, as has been said, as a help to Secular Institutes.

74. Perhaps in some Institutes the formation personnel may feel afraid, the task is too great for them.

75. It really is a heavy task, but it should lead all to feel certain that, while recognising they are “unprofitable servants” (Luke 17.10), when they have done all they can, the Lord will intervene and reach there where the formation personnel know not, nor cannot reach: *“He will fulfil, with his power, all your desire for good”* (2 Thess 1.11).