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THE CONCLUSIONS OF THE SYNOD  
AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR  
SECULAR INSTITUTES

*August 24th, 1988*



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### Information and reflection

I am most happy to speak on a theme which permits me to emphasise the importance of Secular Institutes for the future of the Church. I will do so, taking into consideration the fact that the process of the Synod has not yet ended since the Holy Father has not given us the document which will be the real conclusion of the Synod: *"The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and the World"*. Moreover, I would like to go further and attentively analyse the situation of the consecrated layperson.

### The Synod

Speaking recently (last June 17th) to the members of the council of the general secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, John Paul II recalled: *"The fathers of the seventh general assembly expressed their desire that I offer the Church a pontifical document on the theme of the Synod one based on the work of the Synod, i.e., the Lineamenta, the Instrumentum laboris, the relations of the discussions in the plenary assembly, the reports of the 'minor circles' and, the Propositions which the Synod presented to me"*.

This document is not ready yet but I do not think it will be long in coming. Thus, I would like to limit my present talk to two important documents of the synodal work: the *Instrumentum laboris* and the *Propositions*.

The *Instrumentum laboris* is, as the name indicates, a work instrument which gathers the suggestions and reflections of the bishops on the proposed theme and presents them in logical form. In one sense, it is the fruit of the reflections and experience of the bishops, dispersed throughout the world, before their coming to Rome for the synodal assembly. So that the interest aroused by this theme be extended to the whole Christian assembly, the Holy Father allowed the document to be put at the disposition of all. Therefore, it is a document which is known to many of you, a document that you read before the opening of the Synod in October 1987. Here is what the *Instrumentum laboris* says on the subject we are considering.

*"The unique contribution of Secular Institutes in the mission of the Church merits particular attention. Their members, while remaining laypersons, are called to consecrate themselves to God by committing themselves to the way of the evangelical counsels; this establishes them in the heart of the world as witnesses of an evangelical radicalism".* Each Institute, according to its own method, way of living and Christian presence in the world, shows how faithful laypersons can generously respond to the vocation of perfect charity which is addressed to all. Living their total consecration to God in the world, laypersons belonging to Secular Institutes strive to live the eschatological dimension of the Christian vocation in an exemplary fashion.

Thus they witness to the newness which Christ introduces into the world and encourage other lay faithful to recognise their Christian vocation to live *"in the world"* without being *"of the world"* and to allow this vocation to grow in them. Thanks to the personal availability resulting from their type of life and thanks to the spiritual formation that they receive, many Secular Institute members are able to strongly encourage other lay faithful to accomplish their own task as persons and as Christians. Together they can assume

important responsibilities in the midst of the community of man. This theme merits a deeper study.

*"At the same time, we cannot forget that an increasing number of lay faithful, who do not feel called to found or to join a Secular Institute, consecrate themselves all the same to the radical practice of the evangelical counsels. The present life of the Church is rich in new forms of consecrated lay life, a gift which the Holy Spirit makes to the Church and to the world of our day".*

I believe that this text has a good grasp of the different aspects of the Secular Institutes in their profound unity a vivifying presence in the world, an eschatological reference, an action within the Church. It also calls attention to an ever increasing existence in the lay world of other forms of commitment to the practice of the evangelical counsels. We will return to this idea. Here we simply note that, at the present time, Secular Institute members do not claim any monopoly in the Church but simply desire that their specificity be recognised. For all else, they rejoice to discover new forms in a common search. Let me add that, on the whole, the Instrumentum laboris was well received by the Synod fathers and the text that we are considering was not, to my knowledge, contested by anyone.

By the terms of the Synod, we find the same orientation in the Propositions (54 of them) which gather together the most important points held by the Synod fathers in the course of the debates which lasted over a month. Here is the text of the sixth proposition which treats of Secular Institutes and other forms of self giving.

*"Since 1947, with the Constitution Provida Mater, Secular Institutes have gained a place in the canonical structure of the Church. A new possibility is given to priests and laity to profess the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience by vows or promises, while fully preserving their clerical or lay status. Thus, in the midst of the world, the laity can fully participate in the statute of consecrated life (cf. can. 573). The Holy Spirit continues to call forth other forms of self-giving in which persons, living fully in the lay state, can consecrate themselves".*

This paragraph gives us the essentials. It is a good place to start for all further development. The Propositions, in effect, did not intend to say everything but simply to clarify some main orientations of the Synod.

Perhaps some will say: why is it that among 54 propositions, there is only one on Secular Institutes? To see things from this viewpoint is to deform them. The whole Synod interests and concerns Secular Institutes. The members of these Institutes are authentic laity. All that the Synod said and all that the post Synodal document will say is important for them. That is the way we must interpret the Synod in regard to Secular Institutes. This consideration is, in my opinion, primordial for a just valorisation of its work. To justify this affirmation, let me simply note a few points: the identity of the lay Christian, the call to holiness, the multiplicity of charisms, the ministries and services, women in the Church and in the world, the presence of the laity in the parishes, the socio political commitment, and a process of integral formation. It is with this perspective in mind that I want to continue this report.

## Secular Institutes

It is important to emphasise that a lay member of a Secular Institute is a layperson in the fullest sense of the term. But to do so, it is necessary to set this question into a vaster framework.

When the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia* gave official recognition and a canonical status with the title of Secular Institutes to those who make their profession to practice the evangelical counsels in the world, it was concerned with both associations of clerics and associations of laypersons. Although Secular Institutes of laypersons are much more numerous than Secular Institutes of clerics, we must not forget that the statute applies to both.

Secular Institutes of priests and Secular Institutes of laypersons, besides having in common total dedication to the apostolate, also have in common a tending to Christian perfection through the

privileged means of the counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience lived in the world, i.e. remaining in the world, acting in the world.

If Secular Institute members resemble religious by the profession of the evangelical counsels, they are clearly distinguished from them by the fact that separation from the world is as proper to the religious state as is the common life or living under the same roof.

It is this life in the world ("*in saeculo viventes*", as can. 710 calls it) which constitutes the "*secularity*", the note common to all Secular Institutes but which will be received differently by the different Institutes, notably by those of the clerics and those of the laity. The secular priest and the layperson are both in the world but their rapport with the world is different precisely because of that which distinguishes them: the exercise of sacred orders. Nevertheless, in the logic of their life in the world, both contribute their part in the sanctification of the world above all from within ("*praesertim ab intus*").

It is necessary to measure the innovation represented by *Provida Mater Ecclesia*. Until the promulgation of this document, such groups were governed by the decree *Ecclesia catholica*, published on August 11, 1889, which praised their goal "to practice faithfully the evangelical counsels in the world and to carry out with greater freedom those duties that had become difficult or impossible for religious families to carry out because of the evils of the times" but decided at the same time that they would be simply pious associations (*piae sodalitates*). In 1947, the Apostolic Constitution conferred a canonical status on these groups. Let us not forget that the Code of 1917 completely ignored them. After *Provida Mater Ecclesia*, Secular Institutes were considered a "state of perfection" that is, an institutional and stable form in the search for the perfection of charity. This terminology was still used in the first part of Vatican II.

The new Code, promulgated in 1983, employed a different vocabulary but expressed the same reality: Secular Institutes are authentic Institutes of consecrated life; nothing is lacking for them

to belong to the "*consecrated life*" which the Church defines in its Code:

Consecrated life by the profession of the evangelical counsels is a stable form of living by which faithful, following Christ more closely under the action of the Holy Spirit, give themselves totally to God, who is loved above all, so that having dedicated themselves to His honour, to the up-building of the Church and to the salvation of the world by a new and special title, they strive for the perfection of charity in service to the kingdom of God and having become luminous signs in the Church, they may foretell the heavenly glory (can. 573 § 1). This state of consecrated life is neither clerical nor lay, but the Institutes which make it up can be distinguished into clerics and laypersons, according to whether or not they assume the exercise of the sacrament of Orders, in keeping with the aim for which they were founded. Thus there are two great classes of Secular Institutes: clerical Institutes and lay Institutes. Because of the subject we intend to consider, we will speak of the lay Secular Institutes or rather of their members.

## Consecrated Laity

Consecrated laity are therefore truly authentic laypersons. They share with other laypersons the fact of belonging neither to the clerical state nor to the religious state but on the contrary of belonging to that lay state to which is particularly confided the administration of temporal realities, with the mission of ordering them according to the will of God. All members of Secular Institutes, without distinction, belong to this lay state. The fact of renouncing the right to marry does not subtract them from this condition because no layperson is obliged to marry. In the lay world, we find married persons but also celibates. If the majority of the laity marry, we cannot deduce from this that it is necessary to be married to be truly lay. That would be absurd.

But these laypersons, members of Secular Institutes, are equally persons consecrated by the profession of the evangelical counsels. Without reservations they adopt the consecrated life as their form

of stable living. Thus the consecrated life constitutes a way of life for them. Therefore is it not a contradiction to affirm that the consecrated layperson belongs equally and without restriction to two different states of life, the lay state and the consecrated state? In no way, and I insist vigorously on affirming this in order to eliminate all temptation to resolve this apparent contradiction with a compromise.

There would be a contradiction between these two states if we were to define them in rapport to a same obligation. But that is not the case.

For example, the state of life of a married man and a celibate are opposed to one another and exclude one another because they are defined in rapport to the sacrament of marriage. The married man assumes certain obligations; the celibate is exempt from them.

Now the lay state and the state of consecrated life are defined in terms of different obligations. The first in terms of obligations to the clerical state (the exercise of sacred orders) and of the religious life (separation from the world and common life) from which the laity are exempt. The second in terms of duties freely contracted by the profession of the evangelical counsels. The points of reference are therefore different. The two states, far from being opposed, are fully compatible.

We can cite other examples of belonging to two states in the unity of the same person and the same vocation. The religious priest belongs at the same time to the religious state and the clerical state without the least tension between them; on the contrary, in complete harmony as the lives of many saints demonstrate.

This same harmony can be found in the statute proper to Secular Institutes. Without leaving their lay state, consecrated persons who are members therein will know how to live their secular life according to the modalities that conform to their total gifts to the Lord. This will be noted above all in their life of prayer and personal asceticism.



On the other hand, they live the three evangelical counsels in a manner befitting persons who live in the ordinary conditions of the world.

Does not canon law say that *"each Institute, keeping in mind its own character and purposes, is to define in its constitutions the manner in which the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience are to be observed for its way of living"* (can. 598, §1)? And again, *"the constitutions are to determine the sacred bonds by which the evangelical counsels are taken in the Institute and are to define the obligations flowing from these bonds, always, however, preserving in its way of life the distinctive secularity of the Institute"* (can. 712).

## Apostolate

Consecrated and lay: Secular Institute members are totally and inseparably the one and the other. But they are consecrated for a mission. In effect, they make a profession to practice the evangelical counsels in order to *"dedicate themselves totally to the apostolate"* (PME, art. 1); *they express and exercise their consecration through apostolic activity"* (Can. 713, 1). Since they are laypersons, their apostolate will be that of the laity and will have the same extension. They are bound by the general obligation *"to work so that the divine message of salvation may be known and received by all mankind."* They are equally bound, each according to their condition *"by a special duty to imbue and perfect the order of temporal affairs with the spirit of the Gospel. They thus give witness to Christ"* (can. 225 § 1,2). This teaching of the Church is repeated in the part of the Code of canon law which treats of Secular Institutes (can. 713 § 2). *"The lay members (of Secular Institutes) participate in the evangelizing mission of the Church in the world and by means of the world. "We will note that, in regard to the apostolate of lay Secular Institutes, this canon repeats a formula (in the world and as coming from the world, in saeculo et ex saeculo) from the Motu proprio Primo feliciter, published by Pope Pius XII a year after the Provida Mater Ecclesia. Here is the complete phrase: "This apostolate of the Secular*

*Institutes is something that happens in the world, but it may almost be said to grow out of the world: its existence is in professions, activities, forms, places, circumstances of a secular nature, and so it must remain" (PF, II, 6).*

If each Secular Institute participates in the apostolic mission of the Church, it is not necessary that it have an apostolate proper to it, determined by its constitutions, and even less that it have its own apostolic works. It is important to note this because a number of Institutes rightly form their members to the apostolate without their being dedicated to a particular sector of the apostolate.

## The Practice of the Evangelical Counsels

Members of Secular Institutes are consecrated to God and, as we have seen, this means that they are given totally to Him whom they love above all else. Given to His service and His honour by the profession of the evangelical counsels (cf. LG, 44) in the heart of a specific Institute erected by the Church. Some of these elements cannot be missing, notably the evangelical counsels must be lived in conformity with the traditional doctrine of the Church. We have seen that the manner of observing the counsels will be different according to each Institute and they must in particular take into account the secularity proper to each one. But it is nonetheless true that all the members of Institutes of consecrated life must faithfully and integrally live these counsels (*fideliter integreque servare*: can. 598, § 2).

Thus, for example, the evangelical counsel of poverty cannot ask only a life poor in fact and in spirit but must also ask: *"a dependence and a limitation in the use and disposition of goods according to the norm of the proper law of each Institute"* (canon 600).

The evangelical counsel of obedience goes beyond the practice of this virtue as expected of all Christians: it obliges *"a submission of the will to legitimate superiors who stand in the place of God when they command according to the proper constitutions"* (can. 601). The imitation of Christ obedient unto death is lived therefore through

a determined mediation: (under authority and the continuous moral guidance of the superiors or directors). For Secular Institute members the practice of obedience even calls for a search for this mediation. Their obedience will therefore be particularly active. Why? Because their dispersion in the world and their immersion in secular professions makes it difficult for their directors to discern the opportune moment and the best circumstances for an intervention. The initiative of each member will thus be necessary to make known concrete situations.

The exercise of authority, necessary for the practice of the evangelical counsels, will thus be different in the religious life and in Secular Institutes. In the first case, it can always be based on the structures of the common life; it is not the same in the second. Also, in Secular Institutes, a realistic service of authority will be more difficult, more exigent and will call for commitment at times deeper and more generous on the part of the directors.

## Prayer

Why does the legislation on Secular Institutes (cf. can. 719) give such importance to prayer and the spiritual life in general? Is prayer not a duty of all Christians? Why then this insistence and these special prescriptions? The response to this question is in consecration: it is a matter of that "particular consecration which is completely rooted in the baptismal consecration and expresses it with greater plenitude" (PC 5).

There is a direct rapport between prayer and consecration, a reciprocal relationship. The total gift of self by the profession of the three evangelical counsels is wholly in view of a greater love for God. Now prayer is at the same time the expression and the stimulant of our desire for God. It is therefore normal that to the fundamental commitment that we have taken through chastity, poverty and obedience, there correspond similar exigencies on the level of spiritual exercises.

If prayer is not the privilege only of consecrated persons, but the normal comportment I would say respiration of all those who are children of God by grace, it nevertheless occupies a notably more important place in the life of those who have taken the decisive step to follow Christ more closely (pressius, as can. 573 § 1 states). In effect, Jesus frequently slipped away from the crowds to pray and to retire into the desert or on the mountain alone or with some disciples. The life of Jesus was bound up with his prayer. It sprung from it. It animated his messianic ministry, especially during the agony and on the cross.

*"I would like that you be without care,"* St. Paul tells us. *"He who is not married has care for the things of the Lord: he seeks how to please the Lord"* (1 Co 7, 32). It is in a will which seeks to please the Lord a radical will which does not hesitate before the choice of means that we find the profound explanation of the option for the consecrated life. We want to give ourselves to the *"affairs of the Lord"*. *"That's why we chose celibacy for the kingdom of God but also a life of poverty and obedience. The "affairs of the Lord"* (literally, *"that which is of the Lord"*) are certainly not limited to prayer but cover the whole field of service to the Lord. Still, it is evident that prayer occupies a privileged place in it. The person who has chosen not to marry wants to belong entirely to the Lord. And it is to belong to the Lord that they took this decision. The will to belong to the Lord therefore comes first. They do not want to be *"divided"* (v. 33). The consecrated life thus becomes an area of availability for prayer.

The Church insists on this in its canonical code and demands that special attention be given to prayer, the reading of Holy Scripture, an annual retreat and other spiritual exercises; if possible, daily attendance at the Eucharist, a frequent reception of the sacrament of reconciliation and spiritual direction.

To illustrate what we are saying about the rapport between consecration and the exercises of the spiritual life, I would call your attention to the prescription concerning the sacrament of reconciliation. To all the faithful it is simply recommended that venial sins be confessed (can. 988 § 2). To members of Secular Institutes, frequent confession is prescribed (can. 719 §3).

It is also clear that the practice of the spiritual life must take into consideration the conditions of existence in the world. All the same this will not be to reduce their importance but only to adapt them to persons, places and circumstances. The times and places of the prayer of the laity will not necessarily be the same as those of religious who live in community with their own oratory. The texts of prayer can be different. Secular Institute members will spontaneously bring to their prayer the intentions of the world in which they live. But the nature of prayer does not change. Particular consecration to God retains all its exigencies.

## Future Perspectives

The Synod on the laity clearly and forcefully reminded us that Secular Institute members are true laity. But that they are at the same time indissolubly consecrated. These Institutes are not a new variety - more discreet and hidden of religious life but a distinct reality, a true elevation of the lay state by the profession of the evangelical counsels.

We have spoken little of the clerical Secular Institutes. But many things that we have said apply equally to them. In effect, belonging to a Secular Institute does not change their canonical condition within the people of God. This does not apply only to laypersons but also to secular priests (and deacons).

Today we see within the Church the rapid increase of spiritual and apostolic groups in Italy called ecclesial movements and in France, new communities. Some of them have already adopted the structure of the religious life or of Secular Institutes; others seem to be going in the same direction. But it is possible that not all will follow this way. Many of these groups have strong public and communitarian affirmation. This distinguishes them from Secular Institutes. Is it not the moment to remember that the Spirit breathes where he will and that the unity of the mystical body is made of a diversity of charisms and functions? Moreover, we know that the Church is ready to welcome new forms of consecrated life (can. 605), but also, more in general, new forms of Christian commitment. In any case this

flourishing does not diminish in any way the proper role of Secular Institutes in the Church of today and of tomorrow.

*"They remind us that the call to holiness is inscribed in the logic of baptism."*

*"They multiply the presence of authentic Christians capable of being apostles everywhere."*

*"They respond to the contemporary situation by providing the possibility for true Christians to be present in the profane structures of the world."*

I quote these three phrases from Father J.M. Perrin, o.p. (DS, t. V col. 1783). By their nature, they are meant to give you full confidence in a form of consecrated life which you freely chose the day of your incorporation into your Institute and which has manifested itself as a work of the Spirit.

To summarise and conclude: you are consecrated and lay, you are the one and the other totally and inseparably. I repeat this once more because there is no deep understanding of Secular Institutes outside of it. In the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia* the Church wanted by means of the three evangelical counsels, to give full access to the consecrated life to laity who live and work in the midst of the world. Each Secular Institute is therefore a school of sanctity, which has received the guarantee of the Church. This is the essential that we must state and repeat and that we must meditate ever more deeply.