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

*SECULAR INSTITUTES:  
THEIR IDENTITY AND THEIR  
MISSION*

*Rome, January 6, 1984*



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## *SECULAR INSTITUTES: THEIR IDENTITY AND THEIR MISSION*

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### INTRODUCTION

Since 1947 those Institutes of consecrated life whose specific character had led to their being named secular, have their own place in the Church. They have been recognised and approved by the Church in which they play an active part, according to their particular vocation, in her mission of universal sacrament of salvation.

With the conciliar doctrine in mind, Paul VI stated that the Church *"has a truly secular dimension, part of her very self and her mission; the root ends of this secularity are deep down in the mystery of the Word made flesh"* (February 2, 1972).

Now within this Church, plunged and scattered among all peoples, present in the world and to the world, Secular Institutes

*"have emerged as providential instruments to embody this spirit and to pass it on to the whole Church" (ibid.).*

Following Christ radically while living and professing the evangelical counsels, "secular consecration expresses and carries out in a special way the harmonious union of building up the kingdom of God and the construction of the temporal city, the explicit proclamation of Jesus in evangelization and the Christian demands for integral human development" (E. Pironio, August 23, 1976).

Secular Institutes are defined by the Church through the common characteristic of union of consecration and secularity, which is to be understood within the context of the particular physiognomy of each group.

In the following pages we present an historical outline, a theological reflection, and essential juridical elements, that should provide adequate information.

## PART I HISTORY

Secular Institutes correspond to an ecclesiology emerging from Vatican II. This is authoritatively declared by Paul VI:

*"Secular Institutes have to be seen in the perspective in which the Council contemplates the Church – a living reality both visible and spiritual (cf LG 8), whose life is lived and whose development happens within the context of history..."*

*"There is a deep, providential, unmistakable link... between the charism of Secular Institutes and one of the clearest and most important themes of the Council, the Church's presence in the world. In fact the Council documents underline the various relationships between Church and the world: the Church is part and parcel of the world, destined to serve the world, to be the leaven in the lump or the soul in the body, for the Church is called to sanctify and consecrate the world, to shed upon it the pure light of the supreme values of love, justice and peace" (February 2, 1972).*

These words not only constitute an authoritative recognition of Secular Institutes but they also provide the key to their history which we shall now present in outline.

## 1. Before Provida Mater (1947)

A pre history of Secular Institutes shows that, already in the past, efforts had been made to found associations similar to the present Secular Institutes. A kind of approval of these associations had been given by the decree *Ecclesia Catholica* (August 11, 1889). But they were allowed only a private consecration.

Above all, in the period from 1920 to 1940 in various parts of the world the Spirit acted on a number of groups that felt the call to give themselves unconditionally to God while remaining in the world to work for the coming of Christ's Kingdom from within.

The Magisterium of the Church became open to the spread of this ideal which by 1940 had become more clear cut when some of these groups began to meet.

Pope Pius XII had a careful study made of the whole problem and this was followed by the promulgation of the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater*.

## 2. From Provida Mater to Vatican II

The documents recognising associations that in 1947 were named "*Secular Institutes*" are:

*Provida Mater*: Apostolic Constitution containing a *Lex peculiaris*, February 2, 1947;

*Primo feliciter*: Motu proprio of March 12, 1948;

*Cum Sanctissimus*: Instruction from the Sacred Congregation of Religious, March 19, 1948.

These documents are complementary, containing both doctrinal reflections and juridical norms, with sufficiently clear features as to warrant already a definition of the new Institutes.

These Institutes, however, were very varied, particularly in their apostolic aims.

For some this meant simple presence in a given milieu for personal witness and personal undertaking to direct temporal realities to God ("*penetration*" Institutes).

For others this meant more explicit apostolate that did not exclude the communitarian aspect, as well as direct ecclesial or assistential tasks ("*collaboration*" Institutes).

But the distinctions were not always too clear and one Institute might embrace both goals together.

### 3. Teaching of Vatican II

a) in the conciliar documents Secular Institutes are not often mentioned and the only text explicitly dedicated to them is *Perfectae caritatis* n. 11.

This text lists briefly the essential features of Secular Institutes as confirmed by the authority of the Council. These features are as follows:

- Secular Institutes are not Religious Institutes: this negative definition demands that we avoid confusing the two; Secular Institutes are not a modern form of religious life but a vocation and an original form of life;

- they require "*veram et completam consiliorum evangelicorum professionem*": hence they cannot be reduced to associations or movements that, in response to baptismal grace, while living the spirit of the evangelical counsels, do not profess them in a recognised ecclesial manner;

- in this profession the Church marks the members of Secular Institutes with the consecration that comes from God, to whom they undertake to dedicate themselves wholly in perfect charity;

- the profession itself takes place in saeculo, in the world, in secular life: this element has a deep qualifying effect on the content of the evangelical counsels and determines the way they are lived;

- hence the "*specific and particular character*" is a secular one;

- finally and consequently, only fidelity to this physiognomy will enable them to exercise the apostolate "ad quem exercendum orta sunt"; that is, the apostolate particularly their own because of its aim, and which must be in saeculo ac veluti ex saeculo; in the world (cfr. Primo feliciter II; making use of the professions, activities, forms, places and circumstances that fit in with their secular condition).

Serious attention should be given to the recommendation of Perfectae caritatis n. 11, to provide careful formation "*in rebus divinis et humanis*", because this vocation is in reality very exacting.

b) In the doctrine of the Second Vatican Council Secular Institutes have found many statements that corroborate their basic intuition together with a number of clear directive programmes.

Among confirming statements: the recognition of the universal call to sanctity, the dignity and responsibility of the Laity in the Church, and above all that "*laicis indoles saecularis propria et peculiaris est*" (LG 31): the second paragraph of this section seems to take up not only the doctrine but even some expressions in the Motu proprio Primo feliciter.

Among directive programmes particularly: teaching of Gaudium et spes on the relationship between the Church and the modern world, and the task of being present in temporal realities, working respectfully and sincerely to turn them to God.

c) In brief: since Vatican II Secular Institutes have had the possibility of deepening their theological foundation (consecration in, and from, secularity) as well as of clarifying their line of action (sanctification of members and transforming presence in the world).

By the Apostolic Constitution Regimini Ecclesiae Universae (August 15, 1967) for the implementation of the Council, the Sacred Congregation changed its name to: "*pro Religiosis et Institutis saecularibus*". This is an ulterior recognition of the dignity of the Secular Institutes and their clear distinction from religious. It has

led to the setting up to two sections in the Sacred Congregation (previously the Secular Institutes operated from an "*office*"), with two Under-Secretaries with separate and autonomous duties headed by one Prefect and one Secretary.

## 4. After Vatican II

The study of Secular Institutes has been enriched by contributions from two, to a certain extent connected, sources. The first, of an existential nature emanates from periodical meeting between the Institutes. A second, of doctrinal nature, made up mainly of various addresses the Popes directed to them. Clarifications and reflections have come from the Sacred Congregation.

### A) Meetings of Institutes

Study sessions had already taken place when in 1970 the first International Congress was convoked at which all legitimately constituted Secular Institutes participated.

This congress set up a commission charged with studying and proposing statutes for a World Conference of Secular Institutes (= W.C.S.I.). These statutes were officially approved by the Sacred Congregation, and with a Decree (May 23, 1974) the Conference received official recognition.

After 1970, those in charge of Secular Institutes met in assembly in 1972 and then at four yearly intervals in 1976, 1980. The 1984 assembly is already planned.

These meetings have treated of subjects directly concerning the Institutes such as: the evangelical counsels, secular prayer, evangelization as contributing to "*changing the world from within*".

But they have above all contributed to drawing the Institutes closer together either to share experiences or for open and sincere discussions.

Discussions have been very profitable because:

- besides Institutes with totally secular apostolic goals (operating "*in saeculo et ex saeculo*"), there were others with institutional as well as inter ecclesial activities (e.g. catechesis).

- besides Institutes which foresaw apostolic undertakings through personal witness, there were those which engaged in works or task undertaken as communitarian witness;

- besides the majority of lay Institutes which defined secularity as specific to the laity, there were clerical or mixed Institutes which stressed the secularity of the Church as a whole;

- with clerical Institutes which felt their presence in the local presbytery and hence incardination in the diocese as necessary to their secularity, there were others who had obtained their own incardination.

Through successive meetings, repeated on the national, and in Latin America and Asia, on a continental level, contacts had led the Institutes to accept diversity, (so called "*pluralism*"), while feeling the need to clarify the boundaries of this same diversity.

Hence, the meetings helped the Institutes to understand themselves better (both as a category and as single Institutes), to rectify some hesitations and further a common search.

## B) Discourses of the Popes

Pius XII had already addressed some Secular Institutes and mentioned them in discourses on the life of perfection. But when the Institutes started their meetings and world assemblies, in each case the Pope delivered an allocution: Paul VI in 1970, 1972, 1976; John Paul II in 1980. To these should be added those of Paul VI in XXV of *Provida Mater* (February 2, 1972 and 1977).

These discourses contain rich doctrinal elements that help towards a definition of the identity of Secular Institutes. Here we recall a few among many of these statements:

a) The charism of Secular Institutes and the position of the Council with regard to the presence of the Church in the world coincide:

*"They should give witness as specialists in the field, as models of the Church's attitude and mission in the world" (Paul VI, February 2, 1972).*

This supposes a firm orientation towards sanctity, and a presence in the world that works for its perfection and sanctification because it takes the natural order very seriously.

b) Consecrated life in act according to the evangelical counsels should not only witness to eternal life but become a reminder and universal model: *"The Counsels... come to mean something very topical and typical in today's world" (Paul VI, February 2, 1972);* and their energy is implanted *"into the heart of human, space time values" (id. September 20, 1972).*

c) Consequently secularity, which implies immersion of these Institutes in the world, *"is not simply... the condition of people living in the world, an external condition, it is rather an attitude" (Paul VI, February 2, 1972),* an awareness: *"The condition in which you live, your life description in human society becomes your theological self and your way of bringing salvation into the realm of reality for all the world to see" (id. September 20, 1972).*

d) Moreover, consecration in the Secular Institutes should be so genuine as to confirm that *"deep down in your hearts the world becomes consecrated to God" (Paul VI, February 2, 1972); "directing human values... towards the evangelical beatitudes" (id. September 20, 1972).* It must *"impregnate your whole life and all your daily activities" (John Paul II, August 28, 1980).*

It is, then, not an easy path: *"You are spiritual mountaineers with a stiff climb before you"* (Paul VI, September 26, 1970).

e) Secular Institutes belong to the Church: *"To your special life as consecrated seculars belongs a special membership of the Church"* (Paul VI, September 26, 1970). *"The Church needs your witness"* (id. February 2, 1972), and *"the Church expects a great deal of you"* (John Paul II, August 28, 1980). Secular Institutes should *"keep, before all else, keep alive and growing in your hearts, union, communion in and with the Church"* (Paul VI, September 20, 1972).

### C) Interventions of the Sacred Congregation

In this period, the Sacred Congregation also has been in contact with Secular Institutes in various ways.

On various occasions the Cardinals Prefect, Antoniutti and Pironio, have pronounced discourses and sent messages; and the bureau has contributed subjects for reflection, particularly the following four:

a) Reflections on Secular Institutes (1976). This is a study worked out by a special commission set up by Paul VI in 1970. It is a kind of position paper, containing a number of clarifications, without making any claim to have the last word. On the two sections, the first, shorter one, consists in a few theological statements of principles explaining clearly the values of consecrated secularity. The second, longer section, describes Secular Institutes from the grassroots level of experience; it also touches on some juridical aspects.

b) Married persons and Secular Institutes (1976). The Institutes receive the result of a study made in the Sacred Congregation. It reconfirms that the evangelical counsel of chastity in celibacy is an essential element of consecrated life in Secular Institutes. It deals with the possibility of married persons belonging in a wider sense and encourages the founding of appropriate associations.

c) Formation in Secular Institutes (1980). This document was prepared in order to assist the Institutes in the important undertaking of the formation of members. It recalls principles as well as suggesting concrete orientation based on experience.

d) Secular Institutes and the evangelical counsels (1981). This is a circular letter reminding of Church teaching on the essential nature of the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience and of the need to specify the sacred bond by which they are adopted, their content and modality, that they be suitable to the condition of secularity.

## 5. The new Code of Canon Law (1983)

A new phase starts with the promulgation of the new Code of Canon Law which contains systematic and up to date legislation for Secular Institutes. This is contained in Book II in a section on Institutes of consecrated life. The main elements of this codified norm follow below, after a brief reminder of the theological basis which gradually emerged and became more clear cut during the brief history of Secular Institutes.

### PART II

## THEOLOGICAL BASIS

In the pontifical documents *Provida Mater* and *Primo feliciter* the theology of Secular Institutes has been dealt with at length, and this has been amplified and investigated fully in conciliar doctrine and the teaching of the Supreme Pontiffs.

Specialists have also contributed the results of their studies. Yet it must be admitted that the theological research has not by any means ended.

Therefore, what follows is a simple recalling of the main aspects of this theology, referring in substance to the study made by a special Commission and made public with Pope Paul VI approval in 1976.

## 1. The world as "saeculum"

It was out of love that God created the world, placing man at its centre and summit, and deeming that the created reality was *"valde bona"*, very good (Gen. 1: 31). Man, made through the Word in the image and likeness of God and called upon to live within Christ in the intimate life of God, is given the task of leading all realities, through wisdom and action, to the attainment of this ultimate end. The destiny of the world is therefore bound up with that of man and, consequently, the word "world" is used to designate *"the whole human family along with the sum of those realities in midst of which that family lives"* (Gaudium et spes, 2) and in which it works.

The world, therefore, was involved in the initial fall of man and *"condemned to lose its purpose"* (Rom 8:20), but it also involved in the redemption brought about by Christ, Saviour of man, Who, through grace, turns him into a son of God and once again capable by virtue of participation in His Passion and Resurrection of living and working in the world according to God's plan, for the praise of His glory (cf. Eph. 1 :6; 1 :12 14).

It is in the light of Revelation then that the world appears as *"saeculum"*. The *"saeculum"* is the present world as it results from the initial fall of man, *"this world"* (1 Cor. 7:31) which, subjected to the reign of sin and death, has to come to an end and is placed in antithesis to the *"new era"* (aion), to eternal life inaugurated by the Death and Resurrection of Christ. This world preserves its goodness, truth and essential order, qualities which derive from its condition as something created (cf. GS 36); nevertheless, tarnished by sin as it is, it cannot save itself by its own efforts, but it is called upon to share in the salvation brought about by Christ (cf. GS 2, 13, 37, 39), a salvation that is achieved when man regenerated in faith and baptism, and incorporated in the Church participates in the Paschal Mystery.

While this salvation is actuated in the course of human history, it penetrates this latter with its light and life; it enlarges and extends its action to all the values of creation, to discern them and to withdraw

them from the ambiguity that has characterised them ever since original sin (GS 4), the order to re establish them in the new freedom of the children of God (cf. Rom 8:21).

## 2. New relationship between the baptised and the world

The Church, a society of persons reborn in Christ to eternal life, is therefore the sacrament of the renewal of the world which will be brought about by the power of the Lord once and for all in the consummation of the "*saeculum*", accompanied by the destruction of all the powers of the devil, of sin and death, and the subordination of everything to Him and to the Father (cf. 1 Cor. 15:20-28). Through Christ, in the Church, those marked and animated by the Holy Spirit are constituted into a "*royal priesthood*" (1 Pet 2:9) in which they offer themselves, their activities and their world to the glory of the Father (cfr. Lumen Gentium 34).

For each Christian, therefore, baptism gives rise to a new relationship with and to the world. Together with all other men of good will, the Christian is dedicated to the task of building the world and contributing to the good of humanity, operating in accordance with the legitimate autonomy of terrestrial realities (cfr. GS 34, 36). In fact, this new relationship does not in any way alter or diminish the natural order and, even though it might involve a rupture with the world inasmuch as it is a reality opposed to the life of grace and the expectation of the everlasting kingdom, it also implies the will to work in the love of Christ for the salvation of the world, that is to say, for the leading of humanity to the life of faith and, as far as possible, reordering temporal realities according to God's design, so that they may contribute to man's growth in grace for eternal life (cfr. Apostolicam Actuositatem 7).

It is by living this new relationship to the world that the baptised cooperate in Christ for the world's redemption. Consequently, the

"secularity" of a baptised person here seen as existence in this world and participation in its manifold activities can never be understood outside the framework of this essential relationship, whatever concrete form it may assume.

### 3. Diversity in concretely living the relationship to the world

All must live this essential relationship to the world and tend towards that sanctity that is participation in the divine life, in charity (cfr. LG 40). But there remains the fact that God distributes his gifts to each of us "*in proportion to what Christ has given*" (Eph 4:7).

In fact, God is sovereignly free in the distribution of his gifts. In his free initiative, the Spirit of God distributes them: "*As he wishes he gives a different gift to each person*" (I Cor 12:11), having in mind not only the good of the individual person but, at one and the same time, also the global interest of the entire Church and the whole of mankind.

It is in very virtue of this wealth of gifts that the fundamental unity of the Mystical Body that is the Church manifests itself in the complementary diversities of its members, who live and work under the action of the Spirit of Christ for the building up of his Body.

In fact, the universal vocation to sanctity in the Church is cultivated in the various kinds of life and in the various functions (cfr. LG 41) according to the manifold specific vocations. The Lord accompanies these different vocations with the gifts needed to enable a person to live them. Furthermore, these vocations, encountering the free response of the persons concerned, give rise to different ways of realisation. Consequently, there will also be differences in the ways in which Christians give concrete form to their baptismal relationship to the world.

## 4. Following Christ in the practice of the Evangelical Counsels

Following Christ signifies for every Christian an absolute preference for Him, if necessary to the point of martyrdom (cfr. LG 42). But Christ invites some of his faithful to follow him unconditionally in order to dedicate themselves totally to Him and to the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven. This is a call to an irrevocable act that implies a complete donation of oneself to the person of Christ to share his life, his mission, his destiny, and, as a condition, the renunciation of one's own self, of married life and of material goods.

This renunciation is lived by those called as a condition that enables them to adhere without hindrance to that absolute Love which centres them in Christ and thus permits them to enter more intimately into the movement of this Love towards creation: "*God loved the world so much that he gave his only son*" (Jn 3:16) so that, through him, the world might be saved. Such a decision, by virtue of its total and definitive response to the exigencies of love, assumes the character of a vow of absolute fidelity to Christ. It clearly presupposes the baptismal premise of living as a faithful follower of Christ, but is distinguished from it, perfecting it.

By virtue of its content, this decision radicalises the relationship of the baptised to the world, because one's renunciation of "*using this world*" in the usual manner bears witness to its relative and provisional value and foretells the coming of the eschatological kingdom (cfr. 1 Cor. 8:3 1 ).

In the Church the content of this donation has assumed the form of the practice of the "evangelical counsels" (consecrated chastity, poverty, obedience) concretely lived in different ways, spontaneous or institutionalised. The diversity of these forms is due to the different ways in which one can work with Christ for the salvation of the world, ways that may range from the effective separation that is peculiar to certain forms of religious life right through to the presence typical to the members of Secular Institutes.

The presence of these latter in the midst of the world signifies a special vocation to a salvific presence that expresses itself in bearing witness to Christ and in an activity that aims at ordering temporal realities according to God's plan. In relation to this activity the profession of the evangelical counsels assumes the special significance of liberation from the obstacles (pride, cupidity) that prevent one from seeing and putting into practice the order desired by God.

## 5. Ecclesiality of the Profession of the Evangelical Counsels Consecration

Every call to follow Christ is a call to a communion of life in Him and in the Church.

Consequently, the practice and profession of the evangelical counsels in the Church have expressed themselves not only in an individual manner, but also by insertion into communities brought into being by the Holy Spirit through the charism of their founders.

These communities are intimately linked with the life of the Church animated by the Holy Spirit and therefore entrusted to the discernment and the judgment of the hierarchy that is called to verify their charisms, to admit them, to approve them and to send them on their way, recognising their mission of co-operating in the building up of the kingdom of God.

The total and definitive donation to Christ undertaken by the members of these Institutes is therefore received, in the name of the Church as the representative of Christ and in the form approved by her, by the constituted authorities within these Institutes, so as to create a sacred bond (cfr. LG 44). In fact, by accepting the donation of a person, the Church marks that person in the name of God with a special consecration as belonging exclusively to Christ and to his work of salvation.

The sacramental and fundamental consecration of man is constituted by baptism, but this consecration can then be lived in a

more or less "*profound and intimate*" manner. The firm decision to answer the special call of Christ, totally and freely donating to him one's whole existence and forsaking everything in the world that can create an obstacle or impediment to such an exclusive donation, offers material for the so called new consecration (cfr. LG 44) which is "*deeply rooted in their baptismal consecration, and provides an ampler manifestation of it*" (Perfectae caritatis 5). It is the action of God that calls the person, whom he reserves for himself through the ministry of the Church, and whom he assists with special graces to enable him or her to remain faithful.

The Consecration of the members of Secular Institutes is not marked by a setting aside, made visible by external signs but it nevertheless possesses the essential characteristic of a total dedication to Christ in a specific ecclesial community; community with which the member contracts a reciprocal and stable bond and in the charism of which he participates. From this there follows a particular consequence regarding the manner in which one must understand obedience in Secular Institutes: it involves not only a search either individually or in group - for God's will assuming those duties proper to a secular life, but also the free acceptance of the mediation of the Church and the community through its authorities within the limits of the constitutive Norms of the individual Institutes.

## 6. The "*secularity*" of Secular Institutes

The following of Christ in the practice of the evangelical counsels had had the effect of creating within the Church a state of life characterised by a certain "*abandonment of the 'saeculum'*": religious life. This state has therefore come to be distinguished from that of the faithful remaining in the conditions and activities of the world, faithful who are therefore referred to as "*seculars*".

Thus, having recognised new Institutes in which the evangelical counsels are fully professed by faithful who remain in the world and are committed to its activities, working for its salvation from within ("*in saeculo ac veluti saeculo*"), the Church has therefore called these Institutes "*Secular Institutes*".

In the quality of secular attributed to these Institutes there is what might be called a "*negative*" meaning: they are not religious (cfr. PC 11), so that legislation or proceedings proper to religious should not be applied to them.

But the really important meaning that brings out their specific vocation is "*positive*": secularity indicates either a sociological condition of being in the world, or an attitude of apostolic commitment and acts from them, in order to impregnate them with an evangelical spirit.

The commitment is lived in a different manner by lay persons and priests. The former, in fact, have a particular note that characterises their very evangelization and their witness to the faith in words and works, namely "*to search for the kingdom of God by dealing with temporal realities and re ordering them according to God*" (LG 31). Priests, on the other hand, except in unusual cases (cfr. LG 31, PO 8) do not exercise this responsibility towards the world by means of direct and immediate action in the temporal order, but rather through their ministerial action and by means of their role as educators in the faith (cfr. *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 6): this is the supreme means for making contribution towards ensuring that the world will continuously perfect itself in accordance with the order and the significance of creation (Paul VI, February 2, 1972), and for giving the laity "*the moral and spiritual aids by which the temporal order can be restored in Christ*" (AA 7).

Though, by virtue of their consecration, Secular Institutes are included among Institutes of consecrated life, the characteristic of secularity distinguishes them from all other forms of Institutes.

The merging in one and the same vocation of consecration and secular commitment confers an original note upon both these elements. The full profession of the evangelical counsels ensures that a more intimate union with Christ will make the apostolate in the world particularly fruitful. The secular commitment confers a special modality upon the very profession of the evangelical counsels and stimulates this profession towards an ever greater evangelical authenticity.

## PART III

### JURIDICAL NORMS

The juridical norms applicable to Secular Institutes were contained in the Apostolic Constitution, *Provida Mater*, in the *Motu proprio Primo feliciter*, in the instruction of the Sacred Congregation of Religious *Cum Sanctissimus*. The same Sacred Congregation was authorised to set up new norms for Secular Institutes "*as need arises and in the light of experience*" (PM II, 2 2).

While repealing some laws, the new Code of Canon Law, brings up-to-date other existing norms, and presents a systematic legislative framework complete in itself, fruit of the experience of previous years and of the doctrine of Vatican II.

The essential elements of those codified norms are as follows:

#### 1 . Institutes of consecrated life (Liber II, Pars II, Sectio I)

It is significant and important that Secular Institutes are placed in the Code, because it shows that the Code has made its own two Conciliar statements (PC 11), already contained in preceding documents:

a) Secular Institutes are truly and fully Institutes of consecrated life, and the Code speaks of them in the section *De Institutis vitae consecratae*;

b) but they are not religious and the Code mentions two types of Institutes under two distinct titles: II *De Institutis religiosis*, III *De Institutis saecularibus*.

It follows that "*consecrated life*" should no longer be made equivalent, as has, unfortunately, often been the case, to "religious life ". Title I *Normae Communes*, canons 573-578, contains a description of consecrated life, insufficient to define religious

life since this supposes other elements (cfr. c. 607); and on the other hand wider, since the value of consecration that seals total donation to God in the following of Christ together with its ecclesial dimension, is also true of Secular Institutes.

Again, the definition of the three evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience (cfr. canons 599 601) is fully applicable to Secular Institutes even if concrete applications must take into account their special nature (cfr. c. 598).

As for other points dealt with under Title I, they refer above all to aspects of procedure. Among other matters may be noted that diocesan recognition for a Secular Institute requires also the intervention of the Apostolic See (c. 579; cfr. canons 583 584). This is so because the Secular Institute is not a transitory state leading to other canonical forms, as for example, the pious unions or associations of the preceding Code, but an authentic Institute of consecrated life that may be established as such only if it possesses all the necessary characteristics and already offers sufficient guarantee of spiritual, apostolic and numerical vitality.

To sum up: Secular Institutes have a true and specific consecrated life of their own. The fact that they fall under a separate heading with their own norms, means they are clearly distinct from every other kind of Institute.

## **2. Specific vocation: secular nature (canons 710 711)**

The vocation to a Secular Institute requires that sanctification and perfection of charity be pursued by living the evangelical exigencies "in saeculo" (c. 710), "in ordinariis mundi condicionibus" (c. 714); and that commitment to the salvation of the world come about "praesertim ab intus" (c. 710), "ad instar fermenti", and for the laity not merely "in saeculo" but also "ex saeculo" (c. 713 1 2).

These repeated clarifications on the specific way of living evangelical radicality show that the consecrated life of these Institutes is specially marked by their secular character. Hence the essential and inseparable union of secularity and consecration makes this vocation an original and typical form of the sequela Christi.

*"Yours is a new and original form of consecration; it was the Holy Spirit that put this idea into your minds" (Paul VI, September 20, 1972).*

*"Neither of these two aspects of your spiritual image can be overestimated without damaging the other. They are essential to each other... You are really consecrated and really in the world"(id.). "Your secular state is now consecrated" (John Paul II, August 28, 1980).*

Because of this originality, the Code (c. 711) makes a statement of great juridical weight: except for the demands of consecrated life, the lay men and women of Secular Institutes are lay folk fully and entirely (so that canons 224 231 relative to rights and duties of the laity apply to them): and priests of Secular Institutes in the same way are bound by the norms of common law for secular clerics.

For this reason too, that is, so as not to be distinguished formally from other lay folk, some Institutes require their members to observe a certain reserve as to their belonging to the Institute.

*"You are still lay people, committed to the secular values of the lay state of life" (Paul VI, September 20, 1972).*

*"You are and you remain lay people...,, (John Paul II, August 28, 1980).*

*"When a priest becomes a member of a Secular Institute he is still a secular priest and for that very reason the close bond of obedience and collaboration with the Bishop is unbroken " (Paul VI, February 2, 1972).*

In various canons, the Code confirms that this secular character should be understood whether as situation ("*in saeculo*"), or under its dynamic theological aspect as indicated in *Evangelii nuntiandi*,

that is, *"the actuation of all the hidden Christian and evangelical possibilities, that are already present and acting in the reality of the world"* (no.70). Paul VI stated explicitly (August 25, 1976) that Secular Institutes should also take this paragraph of Evangelii nuntiandi as addressed to them.

### 3. The evangelical counsels (c. 712)

When the Church approves an Institute of consecrated life she requires a free and explicit undertaking as to the way of living the three evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience, *"donum divinum quod Ecclesia a Domino accepit"* (c. 575 1); and claims the right to interpret and legislate for them (cfr. c. 576).

The Code (canons 599, 600, 601) outlines the content of the three evangelical counsels but refers to the laws of each Institute for applications relative to poverty and obedience; it reaffirms the obligation of perfect chastity in celibacy. Married persons, therefore, cannot become members of Secular Institutes in the strict sense; c. 721 § 1 3 confirms this, stating that admission of a *"coniux durante matrimonio"* would be invalid.

It is for the constitutions of each Institute to define the obligations deriving from profession of the evangelical counsels, so that the lifestyle of each person (*"in vitae ratione"*) should be able to give a secular witness .

*"The evangelical counsels which you share with other forms of consecrated life, take on a new meaning, they come to mean something very topical and typical in today's world"* (Paul VI, February 2, 1972).

The constitutions have also to define which form of sacred bond is assumed by the evangelical counsels. The Code does not lay down precisely which bonds are considered sacred, but in the light of the Lex peculiaris annexed to the Apostolic Constitution Provida Mater (art. III, 2), they may be: a vow, an oath or consecration for chastity in celibacy; the vow or promise for obedience and poverty.

## 4. Apostolate (c. 713)

All the faithful are called by baptism to participate in the ecclesial mission of witnessing and proclaiming that *"God, in his Son, has loved the world", that the Creator is a Father, that all men are brothers*" (cfr. EN 26), and to strive in various ways to build up the Kingdom of Christ and of God.

Within this mission Secular Institute have a particular task. The Code dedicates three paragraphs of c. 713 to the definition of the apostolic activity to which they are sent.

The first paragraph, applies to all members of Secular Institutes, stressing the relationship between consecration and mission: consecration is a gift of God the aim of which is participation in the salvific mission of the Church (cfr. c. 574). The one called is also sent. *"The special consecration... must impregnate your whole life and all your daily activities"* (John Paul II, August 28, 1980).

It then states that apostolic activity is a *"dynamic manner of being"* directed towards the generous realization of the Father's plan of salvation; it is an evangelical presence in one's own milieu, living the radical demands of the Gospel so that life itself becomes the leaven. A leaven that members of Secular Institutes are called on to insert into the woof of the human condition: in work, family and professional life, solidarity with their fellowmen, collaboration with groups engaged in other forms of evangelization. Here the Code takes up again for all Secular Institute what the Council says to the laity. *"suum proprium munus exercendo, spiritu evangelico ducti, fermenti instar"* (LG 31).

*"This is the resolve of your hearts, hall mark of your condition as Secular Institute members, to change the world from the inside"* (John Paul II, August 28, 1980).

The second paragraph concerns lay members. Its first section lays down the specific form of lay Secular Institutes: presence and transforming action in the world from within, to complete the divine

plan of salvation. Here again the Code applies what the Council states with regard to the specific mission of all the laity. "Laicorum est, ex vocatione propria, res temporales gerendo et secundum Deum ordinando, regnum Dei quaerere" (LG 31; cf. also AA 18 19).

This is, in fact, the apostolic goal for which Secular Institutes came into being as the Council also reminds us, quoting in its turn from *Provida Mater* and *Primo feliciter*: "*Ipsa instituta propriam ac peculiarem indolem, saecularem scilicet, servant, ut apostolatium in saeculo ac veluti ex saeculo, ad quem exercendum orta sunt, efficaciter et ubique adimplere valeant*" (PC 11).

In the second part, the paragraph affirms that members of Secular Institutes may also carry out, like all the laity, services within the ecclesial body such as catechesis, community animation, etc. Some Institutes have taken up these apostolic tasks as their end, above all in countries where service of this type done by lay men and women is more urgently needed. The Code sanctions this choice juridically with an important qualification: "*juxta propriam vitae rationem saecularem*".

*"I have been high lighting the special contribution of your life style. 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 Evangelii nuntiandi 73, where we are reminded that 'the laity may 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' " (John Paul II, August 28, 1980).*

The third paragraph concerns clerical members, to whom however, what has been said in the first paragraph applies.

For these members a special relationship with the presbytery is laid down; as Secular Institutes are called to an evangelical presence in their own milieu, it is possible to speak of a witnessing mission of priests among other priests.

*"To bring to the diocesan presbytery not only a life experience according to the evangelical counsels and with a supporting community, but also with a clear feeling for the Church world relationship" (John Paul II, August 28, 1980).*

Furthermore, this paragraph states that the Church world relationship for which the Secular Institutes are specialised witnesses, must be noted and actuated also by priest members of these Institutes: whether by educating the laity to a right living of this relationship, or some specific priestly work.

*"Both priests and laymen, as such, have an essential relationship with the world" (Paul VI, February 2, 1972).*

For clerical Secular Institutes there is, besides this paragraph, c. 715 which concerns incardination, possible either in the diocese or in the Institute. C. 266 § 3, refers to incardination in the Institute, where it is stated as possible *"vi concessionis Sedis Apostolicae"*.

The only cases in which clerical Secular Institutes have separate laws, from lay Institutes, under Section III, are two above mentioned canons (713 and 715), the clarification of c. 711 already mentioned, and the precision in c. 727 § 2, to withdrawal from the Institute. No other distinctions are made by the Code.

## 5. Fraternal life (c. 716)

A vocation to an Institute, that is, a call not for isolated persons, implies a fraternal life *"qua sodales omnes in peculiarem veluti familiam in Christo coadunantur"* (c. 602).

Communion among members of the same Institute is essential, and it is actualised in unity of the same spirit, sharing the same charism of secular consecrated life, identity of the same mission, mutual contacts and active collaboration in the life of the Institute (c.716; cfr. c. 717 § 3).

Fraternal life is cultivated through meetings and exchanges of various kinds: prayer (among these annual retreats, periodical recollections), sharing of experiences, dialogue, formation, information, etc.

This deep communion and the various means for cultivating it are the more important when concrete life styles may be very different: "*vel soli, vel in sua quisque familia, vel in vitae fraternae coetu*" (c. 714), it must be understood that the fraternal life of the group should not be the same as that of a religious community.

## 6. Formation

The nature of this vocation to secular consecration that requires continual effort to hold together the separate strands of faith, consecration secular life, the personal milieu. The fact of being usually engaged in secular work and activity and not rarely living in isolation; all this demands a very solid and adequate formation.

This necessity is recalled by various canons, in particular c. 719, where the main spiritual duties of each member are listed: assiduous prayer, reading and meditation of the Word of God, retreats, participation in the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

C. 722 gives some directives for initial formation, mainly directed to a life according to the evangelical counsels and apostolate; c. 724 deals with on going formation "*in rebus divinis et humanis, pari gressu*".

It follows that the formation should be proportionate to the fundamental demands of God's grace for persons consecrated to him in the world. It should be very practical, teaching the living of the evangelical counsels through acts and attitudes of self giving to God in the service of others, helping to grasp God's presence in history, training to a readiness to accept the cross with abnegation and mortification.

It must be said that individual Institutes are very much aware of the importance of this formation. They strive to help each other at the level of national and world meetings.

## 7. Plurality of Institutes

According to Canons 577 and 578 Secular Institutes possess a variety of gifts that allow for a positive pluralism in the way they live the common secular consecration and how they exercise their apostolate, always in conformity with the intentions and project of the founders when they have been approved by ecclesiastical authority. Very rightly, then, c. 722 insists on the necessity of making clearly understood by the candidates the specific vocation of the Institute, and of training them according to its own spirit and character. This plurality is, in any case, an actual fact.

*"The requirements of life in the world and the options open to anyone who would work in the world with the world's own tools, are so many and various that one must expect great variety in ways of achieving the ideal: individual, corporate, private and public as was, in fact envisaged by the Vatican Council (cf. AA 15 22). All these forms are available to Secular Institutes and to each one of their members" (Paul VI, February 2, 1972).*

## 8. Other norms of the Code

The other canons referring specifically to Secular Institutes concern more technical aspects, so to speak. Many decisions, however, are left to the law of each Institute. Hence, we have a simple structure and flexible organization.

The aspects touched on by these other canons are as follows:

*717: interior organization;*

*718: administration;*

*720 721: admission to the Institute;*

*723: incorporation into the Institute;*

*725: the possibility of admitting associated members;*

*726 729: possible separation from the Institute;*

*730: transfer to another Institute.*

It is worth noting that the canons speak of perpetual and definitive incorporation (cfr. specially c. 723). In practice, some constitutions already approved lay down that the sacred bond (vow or promises) should always be temporary, with the determination, naturally, to renew them when they expire. But the majority of other constitutions suppose that after a certain length of time the sacred bond is, or may be taken for ever.

When the sacred bond is taken forever incorporation into the Institute is said to be perpetual with all the juridical effects that follow.

If, however, the sacred bond always remains temporary, the constitutions should foresee that after a certain length of time (not less than five years) incorporation into the Institute should be considered definitive. The most important juridical effect is that from that moment on the person possesses full rights duties within the Institute; other effects should be laid down. in the constitutions.

## CONCLUSION

The history of Secular Institutes is still short; for this reason, and also by their very nature, they are wide open to *aggiornamento* and adaptation.

But they already possess a clear cut physiognomy and to this they should be faithful in the newness of the Spirit. Here the new Code of Canon Law provides a necessary and sure frame of reference.

The fact remains, however, that Secular Institutes are not sufficiently known and understood, for motives deriving, perhaps, from their very nature (consecration and secularity combined), maybe also from their way of acting with great reserve. Or it can happen that insufficient attention is paid to them because they still raise as yet unresolved problems.

The notes, that this document presents on their history, theology and juridical norms, may be useful to bridge the gap of this lack of

knowledge and to further *"among the faithful, not an approximate or diluted awareness but an exact respectful understanding of the original characteristics"* of Secular Institutes (John Paul II, May 6, 1983).

It will accordingly be easier also on the pastoral level to help this specific vocation and to protect it, in order that it may remain faithful to its particular identity, requirements and mission.