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

*MARRIED PEOPLE AND
THE SECULAR INSTITUTES*

May 10th, 1976



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DES INSTITUTS SECLIERS

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1. The peculiar vocation of the Secular Institutes, a vocation of presence among the values of the terrestrial realities, has led several of them to concentrate attention on the family and the "sacred value of the married state" (*Gaudium et spes*, 49).

2. This attention can take different concrete forms. Direct work in the cause of the Christian family is a case in point, and some Institutes have come into being with this specific aim. Another way is to permit married people to participate in the spirituality and the life of an Institute, and indeed there are some who offer them this possibility: certain Secular Institutes give them instruction and support for living an evangelical commitment in the married state, and also consider them as members in the wider sense.

3. In fact, the fundamental documents relating to the Secular Institutes, especially the Instruction *Cum Sanctissimus* (art. VII, a), provide for the admission of such members; but the general principle implies different applications, and problems arise in actual practice.

4. In 1973, therefore, the Section for the Secular Institutes, desiring to have a more complete appreciation of the effective situation, carried out a survey of all the Institutes whose Constitutions visualised the existence of members in the wider sense. The results

of this survey have brought out a large variety of attitudes towards these members: commitments, participation in the life of the Institute in different ways and to different degrees, etc. Some Institutes even wanted to consider the possibility of accepting married people as full members.

5. The Section for the Secular Institutes did not deem it necessary to make an official statement about a disposition that is already as clear, definite and well known as the one relating to the chastity in celibacy of the Secular Institute members in the strict sense. Nevertheless, mainly in order to see whether it would be desirable to issue directives in the matter of members in the wider sense, it decided to ask its nine consultants to consider this problem. A small questionnaire was therefore drawn up that required them to reflect not only about the presence of married people as members in the wider sense, but also about the possibility of a complete integration of such people into the Secular Institutes.

6. The answers taken as a whole have brought out the need for submitting the question to the Congress with a view to possible decisions. As is known, the Congress is the collegial organ of the Congregation and is made up of the Cardinal Prefect, the Secretary, the Under-secretary, and the Section Officials. It also has the benefit of expert advice, the experts being specially consulted on the topic under consideration. The Congress has power to study, examine, and decide (cf. *Informationes*, Vol. I, no. 1, p. 52).

7. For the purposes of the Congress, therefore, the Section asked two experts (theologians and canon lawyers) to examine the problem here outlined and to express their motivated opinions, taking due account of the answers previously given by the consultants.

8. Below we first give a summary of the answers of the consultants, while a second part states the conclusions and decisions of the Congress.

I. THE CONSULTATION

9. Summarising the answers of the consultation, one can say that it brought out the following three assertions:

Chastity in celibacy must be absolutely affirmed for members of the Secular Institutes.

Married people can be members in the wider sense if certain measures of prudence are observed.

It would be desirable to create Associations of married people...

A. Chastity in celibacy for Secular Institute members.

10. The affirmation is based on:

a) Doctrinal and Canon Law Reasons

The charter of the Secular Institutes is sufficiently clear in this matter: *"Besides the exercises of piety and self denial which are a necessary part of the search for perfection of Christian life, those who desire to be formal members in the strict sense of the word, of a Secular Institute, must in fact tend to this perfection in the distinctive ways here specified:*

11. 1. *By profession made before God of celibacy and perfect chastity in the form of a vow, oath, or consecration binding in conscience, according to the norms of the Constitutions"* (Provida Mater, Art. III, 2).

12. Now, subsequent developments of the doctrine have only confirmed this essential condition of the profession, made before God, of celibacy and perfect chastity. To convince oneself of this, indeed, one has to do no more than refer to the various conciliar and

post conciliar texts, especially *Lumen Gentium*, 42-44, *Perfectae caritatis*, 11, Discourses by Paul VI. One of the consultors expresses this in the following terms:

13. *"Even though important developments in Catholic doctrine of the laity have taken place between 1947 and the present day, this particularly as regards marriage, the evangelical distinction between the life of a married person and that of a 'celibate for the sake of the Kingdom' has not undergone any appreciable variation (nor could it have done so). Indeed, the great crisis that has come to the fore in connection with priestly celibacy has made it possible to obtain a clearer and more profound insight into this value, which occupied an 'outstanding' place among the counsels and has always been held in particular honour by the Church' (Lumen Gentium, 42)".*

b) A specific Choice in Response to a Call of the Lord

14. By means of a free response to the choice of the Lord, *"the called one"* elects to renounce certain things, even legitimate ones, for the sake of the Kingdom. The renunciation of the legitimate quid represented by marriage is imposed on the members of the Secular Institutes who choose a life of total consecration to God.

15. This also comes out very clearly from the answers given by the consultors:

"...Deciding to live according to the evangelical counsels means that one strives towards specific values and at the same time limits oneself by renouncing other values..."

16. *"...The special significance of the choice of celibacy made by the members of the Secular Institutes (does not lie) in the observance of canon law or any extrinsic reason, but exclusively in the free and spontaneous response to a special call of the Lord"*.

17. Again, Paul VI, speaking to the Directors General of the S.I. in 1972, made the following declaration: *"The poverty, chastity and*

obedience which you have chosen are ways of sharing the cross of Christ because like him and with him you give up the things which, without any infringement of law or precept, you could, if you wished, have and enjoy" (20.9.1972).

18. The Lord does not require this renunciation of legitimate things of all people; indeed, He does not normally require it of those who live in the state of marriage and who, by giving and receiving, should participate in the human joys of a Christian home. This total renunciation is peculiar only of those whom God calls specially to Him to bear witness to an absolute preference and who respond to this call by consecrating themselves totally to Him.

c) The Need for avoiding Confusion

19. It follows from these different choices that married people and those who are specially consecrated to God must arrive at the perfection of Christian life, at the sanctity to which all of us are called, by different roads that befit their special situations: the former by adhering to the sacrament of marriage, in the sense that they must permit the spouses to attain the highest degree of sanctity in the married state, the latter on the basis of a "*special consecration*" to the Lord. The sacrament of marriage offers Christian spouses the means of sanctification and bearing witness to the glory of God in their peculiar condition of spouses, in their sublime office of being a father or a mother (cf *Gaudium et spes*, 48); and nothing whatsoever prevents those who desire to do so from having recourse to evangelical commitments in keeping with their state if such commitments help them to better accomplish their obligations and mission. As regards the faithful who have chosen to follow Christ in a more intimate manner, they will similarly find that their consecration by means of the profession of the evangelical counsels will give them the support and the grace to realize their total donation to the Lord. This distinction appeared very clearly in the conciliar texts, and it was equally underscored in the answers given by the consultors:

20. *"We are here concerned with absolutely distinct realities, even though they tend to wards one and the same sanctity, and it would be dangerous to confuse them. It would be dangerous for the Secular Institutes, who would end up by losing the true sense of their charism; but it would be equally dangerous for married people, who would be drawn onto ground where they would eventually become subject to rules that are not in keeping with their state of life".*

21. Paul VI, in his message of the 20th March 1975 on the occasion of World Vocation Day, highlights the specific witness given by the faithful consecrated to God. He begins by stressing the irreplaceable and admirable part that laymen play in the Church's faith and witness at a time that is characterised by a lack of vocations, so much so that they assume responsibilities, exercise ministries, and so on. He rejoices at the idea, and encourages this promotion of the laity. But then he adds:

22. *"But all this, needless to say, cannot be a substitute for the indispensable ministry of the priest or the specific witness of the consecrated faithful. It calls these latter. Without them there would be the risk that Christian vitality might become severed from its roots, the Community sterile, and the Church secularised" .*

23. Without in any way minimising the witness given by laymen who are authentic Christians, the Holy Father makes it clear that Church expects a specific witness from the consecrated, a witness that is essential for the very vitality of the ecclesial community as a whole. It is therefore desirable to avoid all possibility of confusion between the state of married people who commit themselves to the practice of conjugal chastity and the state of people who have chosen chastity in celibacy as a response to a special call of the Lord. Although it is true that both the latter and the former must tend towards the perfection of Christian charity and bear witness to the Love of Christ, it is equally true that they must do so by means of two entirely distinct roads, two states of life that are so different that one cannot possibly embrace both of them at one and the same time.

24. It therefore follows that married people cannot be admitted to full membership of Secular Institutes, since these are characterised by the fact that their members are essentially vowed to chastity in celibacy.

B. Married people as members of Secular Institutes in the wider sense

25. The Secular Institute members in the wider sense have the chance of remaining in their peculiar state of life--which may be that of married people, for example--and yet training themselves for evangelical perfection by participating in the spiritual advantages of the Institute, in its peculiar apostolate, and also in complying with some of the demands it makes on its members. It is only in this precise sense that one can speak of the admission of married people to membership of a Secular Institute. It also presupposes that certain measures of prudence should be observed in order to safeguard the value of marriage. According to the answers given by the consultors, these measures concern the following points:

a) The Reasons for the request for Membership and the Conditions for accepting it

26. One of the consultors alludes to the reasons that in the past have led Secular Institutes to admit married people as members in the wider sense: firstly, a certain primacy accorded to the "celibates for the sake of the Kingdom" and, consequently, the need for spouses to learn from their example; secondly, the vague need felt by the Secular Institutes to create a first zone of influence, this not without the hope of arousing some vocations for the Institutes themselves.

27. Only one of the answers deals in a precise and clear cut manner with the reasons underlying the request for membership and the conditions for accepting it:

28. The reasons that cause spouses to want to enter a Secular Institute should be examined with particular care. If the underlying

reason is an escape from marriage or a concept of marriage that detracts from the value of marriage, the request should be refused. If the Institute did not offer the possibility of living marriage in a Christian manner, i.e. perfectly, the entire object of such membership would be defeated.

b) The Consent of the other Spouse

29. Almost all the answers are concordant in saying that the consent of the other spouse is an essential condition for the admission of a married person to membership in the wider sense of a Secular Institute. So much so that one of them specifically says that *"the lack of such consent would be in contrast with the very nature of marriage understood, first and foremost, as a spiritual community"*. Only one of the consultors is of the opinion that this condition should not be imposed, but even he supposes that the two spouses will have reached a prior understanding:

30. While I deem it desirable that the two spouses should inform each other, seek together and reach an agreement, I would not impose the condition that the one has to obtain the consent of the other.

31. This amounts to saying that, generally speaking, a married person should not be admitted to membership of a Secular Institute without the knowledge of the other spouse.

c) The Participation of a Married Member in the Government of the Institute

32. The answers given by the consultors in connection with this matter are rather more complex. All the same, they make it quite clear that the active participation of married members in the government of the Institute does not seem to be desirable. Only one of the consultors frankly visualises such a participation, but even he hints at the serious risks involved:

33. *"If in fact there exist Secular Institutes who admit married people as members in the wider sense, I would be in favour of the representatives of these members participating in the government, but only in proportion to their effective numbers. In fact, if an Institute admits married people, it is only right and proper for it to accept all the consequences thereof. There are also risks: the inevitable interactions of the Institute on family life and of the family on the life of the Institute. Moreover, at a historical moment when it is becoming particularly difficult to live virginity, the celibates would have a minority representation in the government and this implies a danger of insufficient value being attributed to virginity".*

34 Taking the answers as a whole, participation of the married members in the government of the married members in the government of the Institute is visualised as follows:

Three answers hold that this possibility should not be considered.

The other consultants suggest that representation of the married members in the government of the Institute could be considered, but only to deliberate questions that concern them.

According to one of these latter, it would be desirable for the married members to have a government of their own.

35. This last answer, suggesting a separate grouping with a government of its own, brings us to the third aspect of our problem.

C. The creation of associations of married people would be desirable...

36. This desire is expressed more or less explicitly in all the answers of the consultants. First of all, let us quote from two of the proposals made:

1) *"I should like to state the problem differently. Let us not ask 'Some married people are interested in the Secular Institutes, what place could be accorded them in these Institutes?', but rather 'Some*

married people are attracted by evangelical perfection, what can be done to help them?'

37. *The second formulation would permit a freer search and would undoubtedly lead to the true solution. We are here face to face with the problem of whether it is possible to have a certain radicalism of evangelical life in marriage "*

38. 2) *"It seems desirable to set up Associations for married people who want to commit themselves on a communitarian basis to following Christ in the spirit of the beatitudes and the evangelical counsels. One would thus respond to the desire of many married people for the Church to give full recognition not only to the sanctifying value of marriage, but also to the substantial equality of all the members of the People of God as regards the precept of tending to the perfection of charity. The definition of the concrete content of the commitments of obedience and poverty to be assumed by married people cannot but be the outcome of their own experiences and reflections. If this is to be done in an adequate manner, it seems absolutely essential that the experimentation and reflection should develop among married people, without being confused with other forms of life "*

The following two ideas can be abstracted from the replies as a whole

39. It would be desirable to promote Associations of married people. The reasons adduced in support can be summarised as: responding to the need felt by these people to associate in order to live their faith better; responding to their desire to see the Church recognise in full the sanctifying value of marriage and substantially the possibility of all members of the People of God to tend towards the perfection of charity; offering to these people the effective possibility of a certain radicalism of evangelical life in marriage.

These Associations of married people would be distinct from the Secular Institutes

40. In connection with this second affirmation, however, one of the consultors suggests that the period of experimentation could be entrusted to the general management of the Section for the Secular Institutes.

II. THE CONGRESS CONCLUSIONS AND DECISIONS

41. As we already mentioned above, two experts were invited to state their motivated opinion in the course of a Congress that was held at the headquarters of this Congregation. Their arguments, retracing those of the consultors, were to be grouped around the same points, on which the collegial organ of the Dicastery took its decisions.

1. The "*Special Consecration*" of the Members of the Secular Institutes cannot be called into question

42. The experts base their affirmations first and foremost on doctrinal principles, but also mention the metaphysical and spiritual aspects of the question. They recall that the Secular Institutes constitute essentially a state of perfection or consecration recognised by the Church, and they draw support for their contention from the teachings of the Magisterium and the practice followed during the last few decades.

43. As regards the Secular Institutes, just as in the case of the religious Institutes, "*their very nature requires the commitment to perfect chastity in celibacy and this necessarily excludes married people (formaliter ut sic) - to poverty and to obedience*".

44. " The teaching and the practice of the Church, right up to the Council and the most recent speeches of the Holy Father, very clearly determine the need for the effective profession of the three evangelical counsels, a profession that married people cannot make".

45. A further clarification is added in order to avoid all misunderstanding in connection with these counsels:

"Here we are not concerned with just any counsel of the Gospel but with the 'typical' evangelical counsels, that is to say, chastity in celibacy, poverty and obedience, assumed as a stable form of life by means of a vow or other sacred bond recognised by the Church in an Institute. This is the very thing that characterises a member of a Secular Institute in the world and distinguishes him from ordinary baptised. The constitutional texts of the Secular Institutes, i.e. Provida Mater (I, Art 13), Primo feliciter (II) and Cum Sanctissimus (VII ab.), just like the pontifical speeches, leave no doubt whatsoever as regards this 'consecration' that qualifies the Secular Institute member in the world".

46. It is therefore essential to reaffirm this fundamental principle that the profession of the three evangelical counsels confers a *"special consecration"*, a consecration that is rooted in baptism and completes it. Now, "perfect chastity is the essential and constitutive element of the reality that consecrates to God in the vocation of an Institute of perfection. While poverty and obedience especially in the Secular Institute can be subtly shaded, perfect chastity imposes itself as an indispensable element of belonging totally to the Lord".

47. The expert then continues: *"Here we are at the very centre of the specific vocation ... that essentially characterises a Secular Institute and its members in the strict sense. If one were to exclude, even unwittingly or unconsciously, the reality that is at the very heart of the 'novelty' of the spring of grace in the world that is represented by the Secular Institutes, the 'special vocation' underlying these Institutes would no longer have any raison d'être in the Church"*.

48. Thus, the consultors, the experts and the Congress are wholly agreed in confirming the same conclusion: the gift of God represented by the *"special consecration"* imposes the profession of the evangelical counsels upon the Secular Institute members in the strict sense, and therefore the practice of perfect chastity in celibacy.

2. The Married People in the Secular Institutes are Members in the Wider Sense

49. The possibility of married people belonging to a Secular Institute cannot be called into doubt. Indeed as an expert pointed out at the Congress, even Provida Mater already admits this possibility when it says: "*Associates who desire to belong to the Institute as members in the strict sense...*" (P. M. III, 2). This is equivalent to saying that others can belong to the Institute as members in the wider sense. In fact, this possibility was later explicitly affirmed by the Instruction *Cum Sanctissimus* (VII, a). However, these constitutional documents make it clear that there are different degrees of membership, differences that are rightly and essentially expressed by the fact that a given person embraces each of the evangelical counsels to a greater or a lesser degree. There can be no doubt that this refers in a very special manner to the counsel of chastity: although chastity in celibacy "*for the sake of the Kingdom*" is absolutely indispensable for the members in the strict sense, the members in the wider sense do not have to comply with this requirement and can therefore be married people. If, therefore, the mode of membership in a Secular Institute is based primarily on the effective profession of the counsel of chastity, it follows that it will never be possible to eliminate all distinctions or to make the married members in all respects equal to the celibate members. In other words, married people necessarily belong to Secular Institutes as members in the wider sense. This is a normal conclusion reached unanimously by both the consultors and by the collegial organ of this Congregation.

50. Does one have to conclude from this that the distinction in the degree of membership in a Secular Institute supposes measures so rigid that one cannot visualise a close participation of the one group in the life of the other? There are different experiences as regards this matter, and the expressed opinions are widely shaded. The conclusions of the consultors reflect different trends as regards, for example, the conditions of admission or participation in the government of the Institute. Bearing in mind this variety of views, the experts and the Congress ask that this experience of life should be prudently continued.

51. However, since it is clearly impossible to introduce married members into an Institute with *"the same rights and duties"* as the members in the strict sense, one could not but wonder whether it would not be better to visualise a new formula for married people. The Congress therefore examined the possibility of Associations of married people.

3. Towards Associations of Married People?

52. As was brought out by the answers of the consultors, Associations of married people or with married people correspond to a present day trend within the context of the universal call to sanctity of which the Council has spoken (Lumen gentium, Chap. 5). The experts, in turn, showed that it was desirable *"to face up to this reality in a concrete manner because, there too, the breath of the Spirit was pushing or calling to the perfection of charity, choosing the means that He deemed suitable for our times"*.

53. The Congress, desiring to take account of the profound and legitimate aspirations that would like to give birth to such groupings, therefore considered the problem with the greatest attention. It recognised the need for helping, supporting and possibly also guiding such Associations of a new type. In this field, however, as also in many others, only actual experience of life can suggest, clarify, and perfect. It is therefore premature to try to visualise the practical modalities that would permit the eclosion of these new "buds" in the Church. The conclusion of the Congress, in affirming that it may be desirable to give consideration to such Associations with married people, does not in any way diminish their value and raises hope for the future, and at the same time reasserts very clearly the excellence of consecration in celibacy (cf. Lumen Gentium, 42).