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BENEDICT XVI



ADDRESS TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM OF SECULAR INSTITUTES

The Church needs you
to fulfill their mission

Clementine Hall, Saturday, 3 February 2007



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Dear Brothers and Sisters

I am pleased to be with you today, members of Secular Institutes whom I am meeting for the first time since my election to the Chair of the Apostle Peter. I greet you all with affection. I greet Cardinal Franc Rodé, Prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, and I thank him for his words of filial devotion and spiritual closeness, also on your behalf. I greet Cardinal Cottier and the Secretary of your Congregation.

I greet the President of the World Conference of Secular Institutes, who has expressed the sentiments and expectations of all of you who have gathered here from different countries, from all the continents, to celebrate an International Symposium on the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia*.

Sixty years have passed, as has already been said, since that 2 February 1947, when my Predecessor Pius XII promulgated this Apostolic Constitution, thereby giving a theological and juridical basis to an experience that matured in the previous decades and recognizing in Secular Institutes one of the innumerable gifts with which the Holy Spirit accompanies the Church on her journey and renews her down through all the ages.

That juridical act was not the goal but rather the starting point of a process that aimed to outline a new form of consecration: the consecration of faithful lay people and diocesan priests, called to live with Gospel radicalism precisely that secularity in which they are immersed by virtue of their state of life or pastoral ministry.

You are here today to continue to mark out that path plotted 60 years ago, which sees you as increasingly impassioned messengers in Jesus Christ of the meaning of the world and of history.

Your fervour is born from having discovered the beauty of Christ and of his unique way of loving, healing and meeting the needs of life and of enlivening and comforting it. And your lives aim to sing the praise of this beauty so that your being in the world may be a sign of your being in Christ.

Indeed, it is the mystery of the Incarnation that makes your integration in human events a place of theology: ("God so loved the world that he gave his only Son", Jn 3: 16). The work of salvation was not wrought in opposition to the history of humankind but rather in and through it.

In this regard, the Letter to the Hebrews notes: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son" (1: 1-2a).

This redeeming act was itself brought about in the context of time and history, and implies obedience to the plan of God inscribed in the work that came from his hands.

It is once again this same text from the Letter to the Hebrews, an inspired text, which points out: "When he said, 'You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings' - these are offered according to the law -, he then added, 'Lo I have come to do your will'" (Heb 10: 8-9a).

These words of the Psalm and the Letter to the Hebrews, expressed through intra-Trinitarian dialogue, are words of the Son who says to the Father: "I have come to do your will". Thus, the Incarnation comes about: "Lo, I have come to do your will". The Lord

involves us in his words which become our own: here I am, Lord, with the Son, to do your will.

In this way, the process of your sanctification is clearly marked out: self-sacrificing adherence to the saving plan manifested in the revealed Word, solidarity with history, the search for the Lord's will inscribed in human events governed by his Providence.

And at the same time, the characteristics of the secular mission are outlined: the witness to human virtues such as "righteousness and peace and joy" (Rom 14: 17), the "good conduct" of which Peter speaks in his First Letter (cf. 2: 12), echoing the Teacher's words: "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in Heaven" (Mt 5: 16).

Also part of the secular mission is the commitment to build a society that recognizes in the various environments the dignity of the person and the indispensable values for its total fulfilment: from politics to the economy, from education to the commitment to public health, from the management of services to scientific research.

The aim of every specific reality proper to and lived by the Christian, his own work and his own material interests that retain their relative consistency, is found in their being embraced by the same purpose for which the Son of God came into the world.

Therefore, may you feel challenged by every suffering, every injustice and every search for truth, beauty and goodness. This is not because you can come up with the solution to all problems; rather, it is because every circumstance in which human beings live and die is an opportunity for you to witness to God's saving work. This is your mission.

On the one hand, your consecration highlights the special grace that comes to you from the Spirit for the fulfilment of your vocation, and on the other, it commits you to total docility of mind, heart and will to the project of God the Father revealed in Jesus Christ, whom you have been called to follow radically.

Every encounter with Christ demands a profound change of attitude, but for some, as it was for you, the Lord's request is particularly demanding: you are asked to leave everything, because God is all and will be all in your lives. It is not merely a question of a different way of relating to Christ and of expressing your attachment to him, but of an option for God that requires of you constant, absolute and total trust in him.

Conforming your own lives to the life of Christ by entering into this words, conforming your own life to the life of Christ through the practice of the evangelical counsels, is a fundamental and binding feature which, in its specificity, demands the concrete and binding commitment of "mountaineers of the spirit", as venerable Pope Paul VI called you (Address to Participants in the First International Congress of Secular Institutes, 26 September 1970; L'Osservatore Romano English edition [ORE], 8 October, p. 5).

The secular nature of your consecration brings to the fore, on the one hand, the means you use to fulfil it, that is, the means proper to every man and woman who live in ordinary conditions in the world, and on the other, the form of its development, that is, a profound relationship with the signs of the times which you are called to discern personally and as a community in the light of the Gospel.

Your charism has been authoritatively recognized several times precisely in this discernment in order for you to be a workshop of dialogue with the world, that "experimental workshop in which the Church ascertains practical ways for her relations with the world" (Pope Paul VI, Address to the Council of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and the International Union of Male and Female Superiors General, 6 November 1976; cf. ORE, 18 November, p. 3).

The enduring timeliness of your charism derives precisely from this, for this discernment must not take place from outside reality but from within it, through full involvement. This takes place in the daily relationships that you can weave in family and social relations, in professional activity, in the fabric of the civil and ecclesial communities.

The encounter with Christ and the act of following him, which impels and opens people, "must necessarily be reflected "ad extra' and expand naturally" in an encounter with one and all, for if God fulfils himself only in communion, it is also only in Trinitarian communion that human beings are fulfilled.

You are not called to establish special forms of living, of apostolic commitment or social intervention, but rather, forms that can come into being through personal relations, a source of prophetic riches. May your lives be like the yeast that leavens all the dough (cf. Mt 13: 33), sometimes silent and hidden, but always with a positive and encouraging outreach capable of generating hope.

The place of your apostolate is therefore the whole human being, not only within the Christian community - where the relationship materializes in listening to the Word and in sacramental life from which you draw to sustain your baptismal identity - I say the place of your apostolate is the human being in his entirety, both within the Christian community and in the civil community, where relationships are formed in the search for the common good, in dialogue with all, called to witness to that Christian anthropology which constitutes a sensible proposal in a society bewildered and confused by its multicultural and multireligious profile.

You come from different countries and the cultural, political and even religious situations in which you live, work and grow old are different. In all of these situations, may you be seekers of the Truth, of the human revelation of God in life. We know it is a long journey, distressing at the present time, but its outcome is certain. Proclaim the beauty of God and of his creation.

Following Christ's example, be obedient to love, be men and women of gentleness and mercy, capable of taking to the highways of the world, doing only good. May yours be a life that is focused on the Beatitudes, that contradicts human logic to express unconditional trust in God, who wants human beings to be happy.

The Church also needs you to give completeness to her mission. Be seeds of holiness scattered by the handful in the furrows of history.

Rooted in the freely given and effective action with which the Lord's Spirit guides human events, may you bear fruits of genuine faith, writing with your life and your witness trajectories of hope, writing them with the actions suggested by "creativity" in charity" (John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 50).

With these hopes, as I assure you of my constant prayers in support of your apostolic and charitable projects, I impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you.