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NEW WAY OF LIFE ESTABLISHED
BY THE PROVIDA MATER ECCLESIA

To the first International
Congress of Secular Institutes

Card. Ildebrando Antoniutti

Rome, September 20th, 1970



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CONFERENCE MONDIALE
DES INSTITUTS SECLERS

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1. First of all I wish to express my sincere thanks to the organisers of this Congress who accepted the suggestion of the Congregation and organised everything with such patient thoroughness. They must be pleased and happy with the results of their labours.

2. A special word of thanks is due to the president, Professor Giuseppe Lazzati, for such a gracious reception given with such confidence and optimism.

3. Dr. Oberti, Secretary of the Organising Committee, has gained everyone's gratitude by giving so generously of his time, talent and energy to the preparation of this great occasion.

4. It is a great joy and privilege to welcome you to Rome, with the distinguished personages in your company and to extend a most cordial greeting to you all.

5. And let this be said not only to all here present but to all the members of the Secular Institutes, to all those who are associated with your work and all the many friends who admire and support you.

6. You represent a great number of men and women of many nations. The ideal you have in common sanctifying the world through an exemplary apostolate has made brothers and sisters of you all: you are today a telling force in the Church's mission to make the world more Christian, more human, more just.

7. A special word of greeting is also due to the priest members of Secular Institutes. Their great contribution, each in his own diocese, to the pastoral work of raising all the standards of the People of God is made possible by their personal consecration and selfless total commitment as faithful, devoted collaborators who work in full accord with their Bishops.

A Breath of Spring

8. I would like to make a few general remarks before coming down to the proper theme of our meeting.

9 Secular Institutes are recognised in today's Church as a beautiful springtime full of hope and promise.

10. In the history of the Church we see a long line of Associations at every stage of the Church's development and expansion. Today's new burgeoning in this field, Secular Institutes, is described and structured by the legislation in *Provida Mater*, *Primo feliciter* and *Cum Sanctissimus*. The first thing to note about these three documents is that they complete each other. Together they give safe and reliable orientation to what the Institutes are doing for the sanctification of each member and for the apostolate.

11 . It has been said that there is not a great deal about Secular Institutes in the documents of the Vatican Council. But it must be admitted and appreciated that the Council summarised what had been said and done by the Popes and gave us a clear, positive, solemn recognition not only of their canonical independent existence but also of what they set out to do in the apostolate, the aims and objects which inspire them and from which they take their bearings.

12. A pioneer of Secular Institutes, the late, greatly lamented Father Augustine Gemelli, author of a great historical survey of states of perfection which illustrates what they have done for the Church through the ages, laid great emphasis on the idea that the times in which we live call for special intellectual and moral qualities: at every level of society, he insisted, we must bring the good news of the Gospel.

13. *Provida Mater*, which is the work, above all, of the apostolic spirit and intelligent foresight of Father (now Cardinal) Larraona, shows quite clearly how in the course of history the Church has produced organisations, living organisms, which were themselves a proof that "in the world too, with the help of the call from God and of divine grace, one can reach a consecration exacting and effective enough, both in oneself and in visible form ... thus an instrument is found, just right for the circumstances, to get beneath the surface and fulfil our mission" (cf. *Provida Mater*, 9).

14. It may be said that the Secular Institute story is as old as the Church. Canonical recognition and the form of law have done no more than consecrate what was there.

15. One not uncongenial way of looking at it is that they are the lawful heirs of the fervent Christian communities which flourished in apostolic times and have always existed in various forms, their motive energy the same invisible actual grace, a brotherhood that can never be wanting in the Christian family.

16. Nor can we overlook the lesson of history. From the earliest times we see Christians consecrating themselves to God in the world, realising that this was a way of intensifying the life which they had first received in Baptism. The lives of many saints are also evidence of clear recognition of the fact that in the world, as well as in Religious Life, it is possible and necessary to give witness to the Gospel. The medieval Third Orders add their evidence of holy lives outside the cloister.

17. There ensued, alas, a period of some confusion in this field. To restore clarity to the situation came the work of St. Angela Merici which ensured a permanent active presence in the world of souls devoted to the apostolate.

Consecration in the World

18. The classic definition of Secular Institutes is in *Provida Mater*: "Societies, clerical or lay, whose members make profession of the evangelical counsels, living in a secular condition for the purpose of Christian perfection and full apostolate shall be distinguished from all other associations by the name of Institutes or Secular Institutes...".

19. So the Church recognises as members of Secular Institutes those who live their consecrated lives in the world, radiating Christ and his teaching in society.

20. As Pius XII proclaimed in *Primo feliciter*, the Holy Spirit has called to himself by a great and special grace many beloved sons and daughters so that, united and organised as Secular Institutes they may be salt, light and a powerful leaven in the world where it is God's will that they remain.

21. These words are echoed in the conciliar documents which reaffirmed their definition, clarified their requirements and underlined once more their differentiation, secularity. This is their badge, the justification for their existence.

22. Whereas men and women, cleric or lay, who become Religious change their canonical status and their official and social relationships within the Church, becoming subject to the Canons concerning Religious, with all the rights and duties there attached, those who enter a Secular Institute make no such change: the lay person remains a lay person, the priest is still diocesan, more so in fact than before, as he has an additional title of obedience to his Bishop; there is no question of their ever being officially called or considered Religious.

23. The spiritual life of members of Secular Institutes is lived in the world and with the world and has a certain flexibility and independence of the forms and programs of Religious Life. Outwardly they are the same as any celibate lay person because their duties and their occupations are in the world and they may take work and responsibilities denied to Religious. If they prefer to live at home, in accordance with their Constitutions (which most of them do) or in a house of the Institute (Provida Mater, art. III § 4) they may do so, and they may enter any of the professions. That which is not of its nature sacred or eternal they must make holy and themselves within it, bringing Christ into the world. They are God's collaborators in the world of science, arts, thought, progress, social, technical, economic, cultural structures, in civil employment of every kind: at home, in the school, in the factory, on the land, in hospitals, military establishments, civil service, welfare work, the whole vast panorama of the world at work. Take it by and large, what their vocation means is to see and recognise in themselves and in all around them the mystery, the touch of the divine, which carries them to God through nature (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 38). Living by this standard they see with new eyes the many faceted reality of the world in which they live.

24. It means a lot to Secular Institute people that Christ, pure, poor and obedient proclaimed his chastity, poverty and obedience to people like themselves, living in the world. And it rings true in our day as in his, for it has the simplicity, the candour of a divine word from the very heart of our Redeemer. Even if those who find room for it in their hearts are few, that is enough for a heaven, part of God's providence, preserving and propagating his gift to men.

25. The emergence of Secular Institutes is a phenomenon which illustrates the strength and vitality of the Church renewing its eternal youth with fresh and invigorating resources. The Church has given welcome and encouragement to this new thing: it signals the existence of people who had a real desire in their hearts to be holy in the world by committing themselves definitely to the evangelical counsels. The Church has given authentication to this, has given the support and force of canonical status to this earnest search for an

assured way of Christian perfection and apostolate. This means that to the two existing recognised states of perfection Religious Life and Common Life a third has been added, Secular Institute Life.

The Law of Secular Institutes

26. It is clear from all the existing relevant rulings that the Holy See intends to be precise and definite on the meaning of this new state of perfection.

27. The demarcation lines between Secular Institutes and Religious and Common Life are clearly drawn in "The Law of Secular Institutes" (in *Provida Mater*), where consecration, the nature of the bond and other features of the Institutes are described. It is at these points that we see the new kind of society created by *Provida Mater*. These fundamental norms for the founding and good government of Secular Institutes are clearly and briefly re stated in *Cum Sanctissimus*.

28. The executive norms laid down by way of approval and recognition of a given Society as Institute of Perfection imply that the society is in conformity with the Canon Law which regulates its life and work. Giving an organised form to a new state of perfection, the Church intends that the existing associations which have the essential features of this state should be structured in accordance with the norms laid down for the purpose. Only when it is established that such requirements have been met can such an association be recognised as a Secular Institute.

29. The Congregation has always been very careful to avoid any degeneration of these Institutes, has underlined the essential importance of their true nature as states of full consecration in the world, and has been strict about the exact fulfilment of all the requirements, first and foremost being "secularity", their hallmark. Secularity allow me to stress this once again is the positive constituent quality of one who lives "as a human being among human beings",

"just one more Christian", who "has the feeling of being just one of the rest", and at the same time "is certain of a vocation to total and permanent consecration to God and to souls."

30. Besides consecrating the members to the following of Christ an Institute has a further effect on them. Whatever they do, all their secular activity, is pointed or directed to God and is, in its own way, consecrated, part of the total offering of oneself to God. This is the way they fulfil an apostolate "as from the world itself", which is proper to Secular Institutes (cf. *Primo feliciter*, II).

31. *Perfectae caritatis* has a beautiful summary of the Church's teaching on Secular Institutes: "profession in a Secular Institute means a true and complete profession of the evangelical counsels in the world". "Let these Institutes hold on to their proper form, i.e. the secular form".

32. This form of consecration is an enrichment of the life of the faithful, of their consciousness of being the Church and of the life-texture of the Institutes themselves into which it grafts the theology of the counsels.

The Gist

33. The Vatican Council officially recognised in Secular Institutes the essentials of Institutes of consecrated life and, on the lines of *Primo feliciter* recalled that their special features come from the three things which are the stuff of which they are made:

- a) profession of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, obedience;
- b) acceptance of these counsels as an enduring, binding commitment made by vow, promise or oath, recognised in and governed by Church Law;
- c) secularity expressed in the whole of life, permeating all apostolic activities.

34. These three are complementary, equally necessary and indispensable. An association lacking any one of the three could not be a Secular Institute. Its fundamental charism would be other: it would yet have to find canonical identity and status. So the three essentials may be put into a precise: enduring commitment (bond) of profession of evangelical counsels, in the secular sphere, recognised by the Church.

35. The three essentials are both theological and canonical. They give the true and exact image of an Institute and are the demarcation lines between Secular Institutes and Religious Institutes and all the many and varied forms of association which, by God's providence, exist, flourish and multiply before our eyes in today's Church.

36. The change in the name of the Congregation for Institutes of Perfect Life to "Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes" (Apostolic Constitution *Regimini Ecclesiae Universae*, 15 August 1967), made for the purpose of distinguishing unmistakably the intrinsic difference between Religious (with their assimilated Societies) and the new forms of consecrated life in the world was therefore logical and consistent.

Renewal

37. Secular Institutes are still in the first period, the first years of their history. They would not seem to be subjects for up dating renewal, to which by decision of the Vatican Council, all communities are called. This renewal in fact is to be put into effect through a return to sources and revival of the spirit of the Founders.

38. Looking at Secular Institutes from this angle, we must emphasise once more that only those associations can be recognised as Secular Institutes which measure up to the required standards of papal teaching. If therefore any Secular Institute, perhaps under the influence of local feeling about the traditional structures of Religious Life, has receded to any extent from the clear teachings of Provida

Mater, Primo feliciter and Cum Sanctissimus, it should re assess the situation and return to the sources of its life which are the rulings of these three documents.

39. Any study undertaken for the purpose of looking into this matter must of course be done in conjunction with the one authority which is competent to pass judgment in matters as important as this.

40. At all events it is clear that as Secular Institutes cannot be Religious, (cf. *Perfectae caritatis*, 11) their laws must be couched in terms which make it impossible for anybody to take the one for the other in any way and in words which do not lend themselves to that sort of misunderstanding.

41. The difference between Religious Institutes and Secular Institutes is so clear out and precise and, as we have seen, so much a part of their nature that it is hard to imagine how the proper adaptation of Religious to the conditions of the modern world could consist in making a transit (to give it a name much in use) from the state of being a Religious to the state of being a member of a Secular Institute. The fact is that Religious (as *Perfectae caritatis* tells us) are to achieve renewal by returning to the spirit of their Founders in a life of prayerful poise and balance, a life altered indeed and improved, not made other. When Religious clearly do not know how to live according to the charism of their foundation one can hardly expect them to assimilate the spirit of a Secular Institute: it is not just a question of canonical structures but rather of a vocation given by God and sealed by the Church.

42. A kind of pseudo adaptation calculated to lead a Religious to take on the form, the special features, of consecrated life in the world obscures the authentic ecclesial image of Secular Institutes and which is here the most important thing of all would do great harm to the Religious Orders and Congregations. This sort of thing would in fact be the beginnings of the levelling process, the impoverishment of Religious Life referred to by Pope Paul VI in his discourse to Superiors General in November 1969. In the last analysis it would

be simply asking for total secularisation of the Religious state, it would eliminate the specific features by which it is distinct from other Institutes of perfection in the Church. A secularised Religious Institute ceases to be what it was and is no longer recognisable: one cannot but wonder about the stuff of which the new creature is made. I hasten to add that there are some Religious Institutes where people are by no means at ease and there are many things hard to put up with. These should be dealt with by improvement of the conditions in which they are having to live the essentials of their religious life.

43. The Secular Institutes for their part must realise that their whole future depends on their loyalty to the vocation to be a leaven of apostolic activity in the world with their own charism different from all others.

Incomprehension. Hope for the future

44. Here I must add that Secular Institutes have not always met with the understanding and appreciation they deserve.

45. Every new thing in the Church finds on the one hand enthusiasm and hope, on the other reserve and diffidence. Religious Orders were no exception. Many of them had to be tried in the crucible of criticism and opposition before being recognised and accepted as creators of genuine spirituality and truly energetic apostolate. No wonder the Secular Institutes, which bring a breath of fresh vitality into the Church, sometimes meet with incomprehension, obstacles, even outright opposition.

46. To see them in the perspective of traditional structures and rules of Religious, and to think that they ought to conform to that way of life, is simply to fail to understand them. To lack the nerve to welcome pioneer movements which open ways to broader views on modern needs and a freer, more flexible living out of the Gospel, this too is a source of incomprehension.

47. Today men and women who want to consecrate themselves to Christ without leaving the world have the choice of Secular Institute life as a sure way of holiness and of effective, active, productive apostolate. They have the right, and they feel the need, to be understood and supported.

48. I have expatiated on secularity, the specific quality of Secular Institutes. Some of you may be thinking that I have put consecration, i.e. profession of the evangelical counsels in second place.

49. True, I have though after re affirming more than once, the intrinsic power of consecration emphasised secularity. That was because the value of this characteristic feature of Secular Institutes must be made quite clear especially in some quarters which shall be nameless--in order to avoid confusion and the sterile polemics to which confusion gives rise.

50. It is also said though not by Institute members, certainly that secularity is something of a pretence, an outward show, and that the reality underneath is very different; and this is just untrue. The sense and meaning of this word has to be the straightforward, normal, unqualified acceptance in which it is commonly used. Just as Baptism, Confirmation, Ordination, do not affect the secularity of a person, neither does consecration in a Secular Institute.

51. But it is equally true, and important to have clear in your minds, that although the secularity of the Institutes does draw a necessary dividing line between them and Religious, this must not lead us to underestimate the consecration which is their common inheritance. Consecration is the very soul of this new kind of association approved by the Church.

52. Over and above the reality of consecrated life in Secular Institutes, there is another factor which must never be overlooked the fact that members are trained to live this life in many different kinds of Institute, each with its own life style; equally at home in the canonical structure of conciliar and papal teachings.

53. For the present I simply refer to these three themes consecration, formation, variety of type but I am sure they will be on the agenda of your Congress and may then be considered as fully as they deserve and with the serious preliminary study and reflection which they call for.

Priest Members

54. But before I bring these few words to a close I must give you some of my thoughts on clerical Secular Institutes, or, more precisely, priests who become members of Secular Institutes because they consider that this is, for them, a better response to their call to consecration and to spiritual service of their brethren. They are looking for a spirituality in which Christ will hold them closer and the bond uniting them with their Bishops will be more deeply felt in their hearts and ensure that they remain his faithful and effective co workers.

55. The Vatican Council has a relevant passage in *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 8: "Worthy too of high regard and zealous promotion are those Associations whose rules have been examined by competent Church authority, and which foster priestly holiness in the exercise of the ministry through an apt and properly approved rule of life and through brotherly assistance Thus these associations aim to be of service to the whole priestly order."

56. It is worth noting that one reason given by the Council for approving associations of priests, in principle, is the natural right of association which, within the framework of law, is common to all the faithful and indeed to all human beings. When the Council was discussing priests' associations, in answer to a question raised, a Response was given by the competent Commission to the following effect: "No one can deny to priests what the Council, in the light of human dignity in general, has declared to belong to the laity, being in accord with natural law". This Response was approved by the Council in General Meeting of 2nd December 1965.

57. Priests, then, have the right of such association as may be appropriate to the Clergy's needs: to intensify their spiritual life, to improve their apostolate, to foster closer relations among themselves, to strengthen their selfless dedication to the work they do for the Bishop.

58. One of the cardinal points for Priest Members is their right to choose in this way the spiritual ways and means which are most suitable for them personally in the fulfilment of their duties as diocesan priests.

59. The Hierarchy's role here is one of surveillance, assistance, general direction. But the priest may not be deprived of, or impeded in, the working out of his new, higher, spiritual condition provided, of course, that whatever he does as an Institute member is within the framework of the Church's teaching.

60. These priests are different from those of all other associations of priests: they have made a lasting commitment to live the evangelical counsels in a togetherness that has the Church's explicit approval as a right way of going about it. That is why they come under the Sacred Congregation which has watch and ward and fostering of the holy bonds of perfection.

61. Wherever they are (and they exist in nearly every country in the world) they ought to be distinguishable by their integrity and poverty, obedience to the Bishop, dedicated service, an authentic contribution of evangelical apostolate in the Church for the expansion of God's kingdom. Their fidelity to the Church makes them a secure bulwark in the diocesan Clergy against the growing dangers which lie athwart the path of their ministry.

62. Another point worth noting is that the Constitutions of Priests' Secular Institutes are explicit, even eloquent on this matter. Members are taught that they are not only united with the Bishop by the bond of their Ordination Promise but also by a second bond of obedience arising from membership of a Secular Institute. In these constitutional provisions we find it stated in so many words that in all

pastoral activities members work in total and exclusive dependence on the Bishop: he may place them wherever he chooses and appoint them to any post, and they undertake to be ready and available for posts which require the highest degree of loyalty and commitment.

63. One of the most difficult things required of priests members is that they must have the spirit of poverty and detachment from earthly goods.

We talk a lot about "the Church of the poor" but we must also bear in mind that unless priests are poor, generous, devoted to the destitute and the have nots of this world, the work they do for men's souls will not produce genuine results. Secular Institutes do help a diocesan priest to be poor; in fact they bind themselves to poverty by vow, oath or a promise. The Constitutions of Secular Institutes based on *Provida Mater*, do provide a structure of poverty in most admirable, telling, practical terms.

64. Experience has shown that Secular Institutes also provide a reliable framework for a deep spiritual life in the midst of the vocational hazards to which every priest is subject. "If we want to maintain unimpaired in our Clergy a deep interior life", wrote the Bishop of Nantes in a letter to the Congregation, "our surest way of doing it would be to enrol them in societies which direct them in the path of perfection by the observance of the vows"

65. Finally, Institutes give their priest members a training: ascetical, devotional customs, meetings, study circles; in this way they receive a sound training in holiness of life, lessons, in the teaching of papal encyclicals and Conciliar Decrees, they are able to prepare their own teaching of the faithful and similar pastoral duties.

66. We may conclude, surely, that it is a blessing of Providence for a Bishop to have priests like this in his diocese on whom he can count, without reserve, for loyalty, piety, theological competence real co-operation. That all diocesan priests should be members of a Secular Institute aiming at a life of perfection, or at least to some association of the kind, in which they can make Christ's priesthood

intensely real in lives lived in imitation of his virtue this would be, to my mind, highly desirable.

67. I'm always glad to recall, as I do to you now, some words of Pope Paul VI. Speaking to the priests of the F.A.C.I. in 1965 he said: "We all know, alas, that for all Clergy, especially parochial Clergy, one of the greatest dangers can be isolation, becoming a lone wolf, a loss of contact with other priests, even with the people. The F.A.C.I. does make provision to cope with such a sad state of affairs, giving a line of action, making priests feel the need, making them realise the actual union between them not of an organised trade union togetherness but a union of brothers, all priests working together."

68. These words are a faithful reflection of the fraternal spirit of priests who belong to Secular Institutes whose simple purpose is the closest possible collaboration with the Bishop, whom they love and hold in veneration, mutual understanding between all members of the Clergy of the diocese, and the well being of the souls entrusted to their care.

Conclusion

69. What I had in mind in opening this conference was to explain some prerequisites which seem to me fundamental to the purposes for which the Congress is being held. Everything said by the eminent speakers who will address you in the course of the Congress will, whatever their themes, necessarily be linked with these prerequisites.

70. As the program proceeds, point by point, and in the subsequent discussions, representatives of the Institutes which are taking part in the Congress will contribute their own experience and will be able to give us the benefit of their thoughts and give free expression to their opinions. It is essential that each one should say what membership means to him personally, and what he believes he is, and achieves, as a member, and what (within the framework of the papal and conciliar teachings) he would like to see done.

71. Finally, it is a pleasant duty to express my deep appreciation of Secular Institutes in general. In these days of such anxiety and confusion they have kept to their apostolate in a spirit of discipline which one cannot but admire, in sharp contrast to some of the wild movements of protest which flood the Church and almost invade the sanctuary. This fact alone speaks volumes for the Secular Institutes.

72. Secular Institutes do have the inevitable experience of development and wise adaptation suggested by circumstances, but there is something firm and consistent about them. This way of life has not been productive of dissent, demonstrations, opposition to what they have received from their forefathers, the inheritance which has the Gospel for its guarantee and which moves them along a straight path--it means a life of perfection and of apostolic action in the world with the healthy spiritual freedom which belongs to all God's children.

73. I have given you my findings on this subject with the conclusive evidences on which they are based and with that I am happy to extend to you all, on my own behalf and that of my collaborators in the Sacred Congregation a sincere wish and hope that with the help of God "from whom all good things come" you may accomplish a fruitful work. May your vocation sink ever deeper into your hearts. May you always work together as brothers and sisters for your own perfecting in charity and for the good of the society in which it is God's will that you should live and in which you are called by the Church to diffuse the light and warmth of Christ's Gospel.