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PAUL VI



A PRESENCE AND AN ACTION WHICH
WILL TRANSFORM THE WORLD FROM WITHIN

On the 25th anniversary of the Apostolic
Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia*

Rome, 2nd February 1972



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CONFERENCE MONDIALE
DES INSTITUTS SECLIFIERS

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Dearest sons, members of the Secular Institutes.

1. It is good to be with you on a day when the Liturgy recalls the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple and we have it in mind to recall the Silver Jubilee of *Provida Mater*.

2. The promulgation of *Provida Mater Ecclesia* was an event of very great importance for the life of the Church of today. It gave the acceptance, warrant and approval of our venerated Predecessor, Pius XII, who thereby laid down the lines of the canonical structure of Secular Institutes and spelt out their meaning in the life of the spirit. February 2nd means a lot to you. It was the day on which like Christ coming into the world, offering himself to the Father to do his will you were presented to God, to be a beacon for the Church, consecrated to God, a lever of the world for the glory of God our Father.

3. We share your joy today because we well remember those far off days when this historic document, your Magna Charta was reaching its final form. There had been long years of gradual growth. Secretly, slowly, the breath of the Spirit had prepared you for your emergence into the light of day. For Secular Institutes *Provida Mater*

was a birth certificate. They were now accepted officially by the supreme Authority. It was largely due, I may add, to the work of Cardinal Larraona; and it was the signal for a new burst of energy, a boost into the future.

4. Twenty five years is a comparatively short space of time, but they have been years intensely lived like the years of youth. There has been magnificent new growth. We have only to look around us here today or to think of the projected reunion of Directors General planned for September here in Rome. So today our purpose and theme must simply be encouragement, confidence, exhortation, in the hope that this jubilee may be fruitful, that something real may come of it, for your good and for the good of all God's Church.

In Conciliar Perspective

5. A) To get a true picture of Secular Institutes you have to see them in the perspective which the Council contemplates the Church a living reality both visible and spiritual (cf. *Lumen Gentium* 8) whose life is lived and whose development happens within the context of history (cf. *ibid.* 3, 5, 6, 8). It is made up of many members and various organs, yet all are intimately united and inter communicating (cf *ibid.* 7), all share the same faith, the same life, the same mission, the same responsibilities of the Church itself. But each has a distinct gift, a particular charism of the life giving Spirit (cf *ibid.* 7, 12), given not simply for the benefit of the receiver but for the whole community.

So the anniversary of *Provida Mater*, the document which put into official words the charism which is yours and approved it, invites you to return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the Institutes" (*Perfectae caritatis*, 2), to check on your own fidelity to the charism of your foundation.

6. Now what was the original inspiration of Secular Institutes? What was the soul, giving birth, animation, development? It was a longing, a search, deep and preoccupying, for a synthesis, a way of life combining the two characteristic features of your way of life:

full consecration according to the evangelical counsels and freedom to take on the responsibility of a presence and transforming action in the world, from the inside, to shape it, to make it a better world, to sanctify it. On the one hand the profession of the evangelical counsels is a specific form of life, giving both strength and witness to that holiness which is the vocation of all the faithful. It is a sign of perfect identification with the Church, and with the Lord and Master himself and the aims and purposes which he has entrusted to the Church. On the other hand, to reside in the world implies the Christian responsibility of men and women who, themselves redeemed by Christ, are, as surely committed to "illumine and organise temporal affairs in such a way that they may always start out, develop, and persist according to Christ's mind, to the praise of the Creator and the Redeemer" (Lumen Gentium, 31).

7. In this picture of the present situation there is a deep, providential, unmistakable link you might say identification 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 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.

Towards a New World

8. The Church is very much aware of the fact that it exists in the world and walks together with humanity and experiences the same earthly lot as the world does. She serves as a leaven and as a kind of soul for human society (Gaudium et spes, 40). So the Church has a truly secular dimension, part of its very self, and of its mission; the root ends of this secularity are deep down in the mystery of the Word made flesh; it takes many different charismatic forms in its members, priests and laity.

9. Unremittingly the Popes have called upon Christians especially in recent years to face up loyally and unequivocally to their responsibility to the world. Today the call is more urgent than ever. Mankind is at a cross roads of history. A new world is rising: men are looking for new forms of thought and action which will determine their life in the centuries to come.

10. The world believes that it can stand on its own feet and has no need of divine grace or the Church in its self development and expansion: a tragic divorce has come about between faith and life, between the two lines of progress, technology on the one hand, faith in the living God on the other. It has been said, not without good reason, that the most serious problem in current development is that of the relationship of the natural and supernatural order. The Church of Vatican II has not been deaf to this "voice of the times; she has answered, she has no doubts about her mission to the world, to society: conscious of her own nature as "the universal sacrament of salvation" the Church sees the impossibility of human fulfilment without grace, that is, without the Word of God who is "the goal of human history, the focal point of the longings of history and of civilisation, the centre of the human race, the joy of every heart, and the answer to all its yearnings" (*Gaudium et spes*, 45).

11. At a time like the present, Secular Institutes, in virtue of their charism of consecrated secularity (cf *Perfectae caritatis*, 11), have emerged as providential instruments to embody this spirit and to pass it on to the whole Church. Their life, even before the Council, was a kind of forging ahead in this matter, and that is the best of reasons today for giving witness as specialists in the field as models, of the Church's attitude and mission in the world.

12. Clear directives and repeated instructions are not enough, as things stand today, to accomplish those changes in the Church which are needed in today's world. We need the realities of person and community, people who embody and transmit consciously and responsibly, the spirit with which the Council required all members of the Church to be imbued. This is the mission given to you and being given it enhances your stature to be the model of untiring

inward energy towards the new relationship and attitude to the world, to service of the world, which the Church seeks to embody.

Interior alchemy

13. B) How can this be done? Through that blending of two realities which is the very shape and fashion of your lives. First of all, your consecrated life in the spirit of the evangelical counsels means that you belong inseparably to Christ and the Church, that you are permanently and profoundly intent on the pursuit of holiness, and that you are fully aware that, when all is said and done, it is Christ alone who brings about by his grace the redemption and transformation of the world. It is deep down in your hearts that the world becomes something consecrated to God (cf *Lumen Gentium*, 34). If that is how you live, then it is quite certain that the mutual understanding and feeling between you and the world will not become worldliness or naturalism but will tell the world that Christ loves us and has been sent forth to us by the Father. Your consecration is the root of hope, which must always support you, even when visible results are scanty or non-existent. Rather than by visible good works, your life is fruitful for the world above all through the love of Christ which has impelled you to make the gift of yourselves to God in a life that will give witness to him in the conditions of everyday life.

14. Seen in this light the Counsels which you follow (as do members of other forms of consecrated life) take on a new meaning, they come to mean something very topical and typical in today's world:

Chastity comes to mean being a living model of self control, life in the spirit, tending, stretching out all the time to heavenly things, and this in a world which has no thought but for itself, no rein or brake on its human instincts.

Poverty tells the world where we stand with the good and chattels of this world, and the use we make of them: your Christian attitude in this matter is the true one both for the highly developed countries, where the rat race for money is such a threat to the values

we learn from the Gospel, and for the unhappy countries which have fewer resources. Here your poverty is the token of your union of spirit: you are with your brothers in their trials.

Obedience becomes witness of the humble acceptance of the mediation of the Church and, in general of the wisdom of God governing the world through created causes; today in the modern crisis of authority, your obedience becomes witness to the Christian order of the universe.

Making all creation holy

15. In the second place, because you are essentially secular you accentuate your relationship with the world (and in this you differ from Religious). Secularity is not simply your condition as people living in the world, an external condition. It is rather an attitude, the attitude of people who are aware that they have a responsibility, being in the world, to serve the world, to make it as God would have it, more just, more human, to sanctify it from within. This attitude is primarily one of respect for the world's rightful autonomy, its values, its laws (cf *Gaudium et spes*, 36), though of course this does not imply that the world is independent of God, Creator and final end of all. One of the important dimensions of this characteristic quality of your secularity is that you take the natural order seriously, working to bring it to perfection and to holiness so that things which are necessarily a part of life in the world may be integrated into the spirituality, the training, the ascetics, the structure, the external forms, the activities, of your Institute. Thus it will be possible to fulfil what *Primo feliciter* expresses in these words: "(that) your own special character, the secular, may be reflected in everything" (II) .

16. 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 *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 15-22). All these forms are available to Secular Institutes and to each one of their members. The pluralism of your

forms of life (cf. the Recommendation on Pluralism World Congress of Secular Institutes Rome, 1970) allows you to set up various kinds of community, and to create and animate, within, the atmosphere and climate and surroundings of your various life situations your own ambient air climate of thought and life in which your ideal is a reality, and to make use for this purpose of various ways and means, even in situations where the only possible witness to the Church will be individual, silent and hidden

Priest Members. Where they stand

17. Now we must add a few words for Priest members: (priests who join Secular Institutes). Priests can join a Secular Institute, as is explicitly envisaged in the teaching of the Church, beginning with *Primo feliciter* and the Council Decree *Perfectae caritatis*. Both priests and laymen, as such, have an essential relationship with the world. To fulfil his own vocation the priest must translate this relationship into real life as a model to all. As Christ was sent forth from the Father (cf John, 20,21) he also is sent into the world. But as a priest he assumes a responsibility specifically sacerdotal for the shaping, the true fashioning of this perishable world. Unlike the layman he does not (except in rare cases, as described in a Recommendation of the recent Synod of Bishops) exercise this responsibility by direct contact and activity in the temporal sphere, but by ministerial action and through his role of educator in the faith (cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 6): this is the best and noblest way of contributing to the world's progress, day by day, in accordance with the order and the meaning of creation.

18. When a priest becomes a member of a Secular Institute, he is still a secular priest and for that reason the close bond of obedience and collaboration with the Bishop is unbroken; as with other priests of the diocese his assistance is available to this brotherhood of the diocese, this "presbyterium" in the great mission which makes them "co operators with the truth", carefully preserving the "special bonds of apostolic charity, of ministry and of fraternity" (*Presbyterorum*

Ordinis, 8) which must be a distinguishing feature of this diocesan organism. As a member of a Secular Institute the priest finds, over and above this feature of his priestly life, help in the following of the evangelical counsels. I am well aware that this matter of priests belonging to Secular Institutes, is a problem. The implications are widely perceived and felt. It goes deep. Any solution must fully respect the "sensus Ecclesiae". I know that you are actively engaged in finding satisfactory answers to the questions raised. Persevere in your efforts: it is good work in a sensitive area.

Relations with the Bishops

19. Indeed there is a problem arising from three factors, each of the greatest importance: the "secular" aspect: the need to maintain a close personal link with the Institute from which the priest expects spiritual food, refreshment and support; and the need to remain in strict dependence upon the bishop of the diocese. I am well aware, as I said a moment ago, that you are studying the question in the hope of reconciling these apparent incompatibles. Continue this search for solutions, work freely along the lines I have indicated, make full use of the talent you have, your training, your appreciation of what is involved, your experience. I would only direct your attention to one or two points which seem to me particularly worthy of your consideration.

20. a) No solution must impinge in any way whatsoever upon the authority of the bishop, who, by divine right, is exclusively and directly responsible for the flock, the "portion of the Church assigned to him" (cf Acts, 20,28).

21. b) In this connection there is another very real factor which you must bear in mind and never lose sight of: a man is a unity, personal, psychological, practical; the distinction between the spiritual and pastoral dimension is theoretical.

22. Far be it from me to condition your research allow me to emphasise this much less do I intend to restrict it by suggesting some

ready made solution. It is just that I want to suggest that you do not lose sight for a moment of two factors which to my mind are of capital importance.

23. So we come to the end of our reflections together, though there would indeed be much more to say. There are many possible options in a developing situation. But it is a great joy to tell you of my hopes and wishes for you: that your Institutes may be, increasingly, models and examples of the spirit which the Council breathed into the Church: thus may the withering threat of secularism be removed, with its merely human set of values, values cut off from their origin, God, from whom their whole meaning and purpose really comes; and through the example you give may the Church be truly the haven, the animator of the whole world.

24. The Church needs your witness, and what the whole world is looking for is more and more tangible evidence of the Church's new attitude. In you, because of your consecrated secularity, this must be very clear indeed. To speed you on your way you have the Apostolic blessing given from my heart to you and to all the members of your dear Institutes who deserve so well of the whole Church.