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JOHN PAUL II



APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION  
*VITA CONSECRATA*



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### APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION “VITA CONSECRATA” (CONSECRATED LIFE)

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10. The Holy Spirit, who wondrously fashions the variety of charisms, has given rise in our time to new expressions of consecrated life, which appear as a providential response to the new needs encountered by the Church today as she carries out her mission in the world.

One thinks in the first place of members of Secular Institutes seeking to live out their consecration to God in the world through the profession of the evangelical counsels in the midst of temporal realities; they wish in this way to be a leaven of wisdom and a witness of grace within cultural, economic and political life. Through their own specific blending of presence in the world and consecration, they seek to make present in society the newness and power of Christ's kingdom, striving to transfigure the world from within by the power of the Beatitudes. In this way, while they belong completely to God and are thus fully consecrated to his service, their activity in the ordinary life of the world contributes, by the power of the Spirit, to shedding the light of the Gospel on temporal realities. Secular Institutes, each in accordance with its specific nature, thus help to ensure that the Church has an effective presence in society<sup>1</sup>.

A valuable role is also played by clerical Secular Institutes, in which priests who belong to the diocesan clergy, even when some of them are recognized as being incardinated in the Institute, consecrate themselves to Christ through the practice of the evangelical counsels in accordance with a specific charism. They discover in the spiritual riches of the Institute to which they belong great help for living more deeply the spirituality proper to the priesthood and thus they

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1. Cf. *Propositio* 11.

are enabled to be a leaven of communion and apostolic generosity among their fellow clergy.

Constant dialogue between superiors of Institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life and bishops is most valuable in order to promote mutual understanding, which is the necessary precondition for effective cooperation, especially in pastoral matters. Thanks to regular contacts of this kind, superiors, both men and women, can inform bishops about the apostolic undertakings which they are planning in dioceses, in order to agree on the necessary practical arrangements. In the same way, it is helpful for delegates of the conferences of major superiors to be invited to meetings of the bishops' conferences and, in turn, for delegates of the episcopal conferences to be invited to attend the conferences of major superiors, following predetermined formats. It would be a great help if, where they do not yet exist, mixed commissions of bishops and major superiors<sup>2</sup> were set up at the national level for the joint study of problems of common interest. Likewise, better reciprocal knowledge will result if the theology and the spirituality of the consecrated life are made part of the theological preparation of diocesan priests, and if adequate attention to the theology of the particular Church and to the spirituality of the diocesan clergy is included in the formation of consecrated persons<sup>3</sup>. [...]

52. Fraternal spiritual relations and mutual cooperation among different Institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life are sustained and nourished by the sense of ecclesial communion. Those who are united by a common commitment to the following of Christ and are inspired by the same Spirit cannot fail to manifest visibly, as branches of the one vine, the fullness of the Gospel of love. Mindful of the spiritual friendship which often united founders and foundresses during their lives, consecrated persons, while remaining faithful to the character of their own Institute, are called to practice a fraternity which is exemplary and which will serve to encourage the other members of the Church in the daily task of bearing witness to the Gospel. [...]

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2. Cf. Propositio 29, 4.

3. Cf. Propositio 49. B

53. A significant contribution to communion can be made by the conferences of major superiors and by the conferences of Secular Institutes. Encouraged and regulated by the Second Vatican Council<sup>4</sup> and by subsequent documents<sup>5</sup>, these bodies have as their principal purpose the promotion of the consecrated life within the framework of the Church's mission.

By means of these bodies, Institutes express the communion which unites them, and they seek the means to reinforce that communion, with respect and esteem for the uniqueness of their different charisms, which reflect the mystery of the Church and the richness of divine wisdom<sup>6</sup>. I encourage Institutes of consecrated life to work together, especially in those countries where particularly difficult situations increase the temptation for them to withdraw into themselves, to the detriment of the consecrated life itself and of the Church. Rather, these Institutes should help one another in trying to discern God's plan in this troubled moment of history, in order better to respond to it with appropriate works of the apostolate.<sup>7</sup> In the perspective of a communion open to the challenges of our time, superiors, men and women, *"working in harmony with the bishops,"* should seek *"to make use of the accomplishments of the best members of each Institute and to offer services which not only help to overcome eventual limits but which create a valid style of formation in consecrated life"*<sup>8</sup>.

I exhort the conferences of major superiors and the conferences of Secular Institutes to maintain frequent and regular contacts with the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, as a sign of their communion with the Holy See. An

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4. Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life *Perfectae Caritatis*, 23.

5. Cf. Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes and Congregation for the Mutual Relations between Bishops and Religious in the Bishops' Directives *Church Mutuae Relationes* (May 14, 1978). 21, 61: AAS 70 (1978), 486, 503504; Code of Canon Law, Canons 708709.

6. Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life *Perfectae Caritatis*, I; Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 46.

7. Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 4.

8. John Paul II, Message to the Fourteenth Assembly of the Conference of Religious of Brazil (July 11, 1986), 4: *Insegnamenti IX/2* (1986). 237; cf. *Propositio* 31.

active and trusting relationship ought also to be maintained with the episcopal conference of each country. In the spirit of the document *Mutuae Relationes*, these contacts should be established on a stable basis, in order to provide for constant and timely coordination of initiatives as they come up. If all this is done with perseverance and a spirit of faithful adherence to the directives of the Magisterium, the organizations which promote coordination and communion will prove to be particularly helpful in formulating solutions which avoid misunderstandings and tensions both on the theoretical and practical levels.<sup>9</sup> In this way they will make a positive contribution not only to the growth of communion between Institutes of consecrated life and the bishops, but also to the advancement of the mission of the particular Churches.

54. [...] Members of Secular Institutes, lay or clerical, relate to other members of the faithful at the level of everyday life. Today, often as a result of new situations, many Institutes have come to the conclusion that their charism can be shared with the laity. The laity are therefore invited to share more intensely in the spirituality and mission of these Institutes. We may say that, in the light of certain historical experiences such as those of the secular or third orders, a new chapter, rich in hope, has begun in the history of relations between consecrated persons and the laity.

56. A significant expression of lay people's sharing in the richness of the consecrated life is their participation in various Institutes under the new form of so-called associate members or, in response to conditions present in certain cultures, as people who share fully for a certain period of time the Institute's community life and its particular dedication to contemplation or the apostolate. This should always be done in such a way that the identity of the Institute in its internal life is not harmed<sup>10</sup>.

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9. Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes and Congregation for Bishops. Directives for the Mutual Relations between Bishops and Religious in the Church *Mutuae Relationes* (May 14, 1978), 63, 65: AAS 70 (1978), 504, 504505.

10. Cf Proposition 33, A and C.

This voluntary service, which draws from the richness of the consecrated life, should be held in great esteem; it is however necessary to provide proper formation so that, besides being competent, volunteers always have supernaturally motivated intentions and, in their projects, a strong sense of community and of the Church.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, it should be borne in mind that initiatives involving lay persons at the decision-making level, in order to be considered the work of a specific Institute, must promote the ends of that Institute and be carried out under its responsibility. Therefore, if lay persons take on a directive role, they will be accountable for their actions to the competent superiors. It is necessary for all this to be examined and regulated by special directives in each Institute, to be approved by higher authority. These directives should indicate the respective responsibilities of the Institute itself of its communities, associate members and volunteers.

Consecrated persons, sent by their superiors and remaining subject to them, can take part in specific forms of cooperation in lay initiatives, particularly in organizations and institutions which work with those on the margins of society and which have the purpose of alleviating human suffering. Such collaboration, if prompted and sustained by a clear and strong Christian identity and respectful of the particular character of the consecrated life, can make the radiant power of the Gospel shine forth brightly even in the darkest situations of human life.

In recent years, many consecrated persons have become members of one or other of the ecclesial movements which have spread in our time. From these experiences, those involved usually draw benefit, especially in the area of spiritual renewal. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that in certain cases this involvement causes uneasiness and disorientation at the personal or community level, especially when these experiences come into conflict with the demands of the common life or of the Institute's spirituality. It is therefore necessary to take care that membership in these ecclesial movements does not endanger the charism or discipline of the Institute of origin<sup>12</sup>, and

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11. Cf. Propositio 33, B.

12. Cf. Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life,

that all is done with the permission of superiors and with the full intention of accepting their decisions.

78. [...] The Church's mission *ad gentes* offers consecrated women religious brothers and members of Secular Institutes special and extraordinary opportunities for a particularly fruitful apostolate. The members of Secular Institutes, by their presence in fields more suited to the lay vocation, can engage in the valuable work of evangelizing all sectors of society, as well as the structures and the very laws which regulate it. Moreover, they can bear witness to Gospel values, living in contact with those who do not yet know Jesus, thus making a specific contribution to the mission.

97. [...] Because of the importance that Catholic and ecclesiastical universities and faculties have in the field of education and evangelization, Institutes which are responsible for their direction should be conscious of their responsibility. They should ensure the preservation of their unique Catholic identity in complete fidelity to the Church's Magisterium, all the while engaging in active dialogue with presentday cultural trends. Moreover, depending on the circumstances, the members of these Institutes and societies readily become involved in the educational structures of the State. Members of Secular Institutes in particular, because of their specific calling, are called to this kind of cooperation.

99. [...] Furthermore, consecrated persons, especially members of Secular Institutes, should willingly lend their help, wherever pastorally appropriate, for the religious formation of leaders and workers in the field of public and private social communications. This should be done in order to offset the inappropriate use of the media and to promote higher quality programs, the contents of which will be respectful of the moral law and rich in human and Christian values.

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Instruction on Fraternal Life in Community *Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor* (February 2, 1994), 62; Rome, 1994, 7577; Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes *Potissimum Institutioni* (February 2, 1990), 9293; AAS 82 (1990), 123124.