

# RELIGIOUS LIFE OR SECULAR INSTITUTE

By J. BEYER

**R**ELIGIOUS INSTITUTES will change into secular Institutes'. This assertion – or is it a slogan? – is fast becoming common currency in these days of renewal. By such a change, it is claimed, religious Institutes will at last become fully adjusted to the needs of the apostolate and incorporated into a secularized society. Their members, breaking out at last from their isolation into the world, will begin to find God in their fellow-men.

Remarks of this kind, vague and extreme as they are, still call for serious examination. It would be different if we were concerned simply with insignificant classifying, with juridical status or with external change. But it is the very life of these Institutes, of the reverence their vocation commands and the fidelity of their members to the graces which brought them into being in the Church, which is being called into question. It takes more than a mere declaration to transform a religious into a secular Institute. The latter has its own way of life as well, its own institutions, its specific vocation. Secular Institutes had a hard time at the Council to obtain official recognition of all this. They have no wish to see their doctrinal or canonical position jeopardized, their spiritual and apostolic value diluted by the incomprehension of Institutes entirely different from them, apart, perhaps from canonical approbation and a few outward signs of dubious secularity.

It is not our purpose to question the good will of a religious congregation which declares itself to be a secular Institute for the purpose of modernization. The trouble is that such a congregation will be powerless to change its spirit and fundamental attitude – to confer upon itself a secular mission which it has not received; thus preventing christian and non-christian alike from grasping the true meaning of an 'Institute of full secularity'. It is a cause of great concern to the true secular Institute that ecclesiastical authority should approve as secular Institutes groups of religious women simply because they want to abandon the habit; especially as there are several

religious Institutes who have never worn the habit and carry no distinctive mark of their religious consecration.

The problem is more complex and far-reaching than is generally supposed, particularly in view of the evolution which has taken place amongst secular Institutes themselves. It will be helpful to consider this briefly.

*The Evolution of the Secular Institute and its Crises*

In 1947, Pope Pius XII gave a canonical status to certain experimental Institutes which had long felt the need of an approval which would give the official sanction of the Church to their vocation. The important point was the declaration on their way of life: it was a consecration by the evangelical counsels, but it was not a religious life. These Institutes were not obliged to follow the law for religious, nor to count themselves amongst the Societies of the Common Life, which included at that time Institutes of recent foundation like Opus Dei, the Workers of the Sacred Heart (*Opérairess du Sacré Coeur*) and the Society of diocesan priests (*Société des Prêtres diocésains*). At this very time, a religious congregation like Our Lady of Work (*Notre Dame du Travail*), in which the extern sisters were more numerous than the interns (who alone were religious in the strict sense), were questioning their canonical status and demanding pontifical approval for their Institute in the same breath. Institutes truly secular by foundation and spirit, such as that of Fr. A. Gemelli O.F.M., were seeking approbation not from the Sacred Congregation of Religious, but from another Congregation, of the Council.

These various Societies were approved by Pius XII as secular Institutes. They were the third of the 'states of perfection'. The first was that of the Orders and Congregations – canonically more perfect because of its external witness, its separation from the world by the religious habit, by the common life (declared as an essential of religious life by the Code of Canon Law and obligatory on all members), and the three vows of religion, made publicly and in the name of the Church. The second state was that of the Societies of the Common Life: often they possessed a common habit (e.g. the Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul with their once familiar cornettes), and a common life (sometimes a very exacting one, e.g. the White Fathers), but they did not make the public vows of religion (often for an excellent reason, like that of St Vincent de Paul – in order to avoid the enclosure and the grille which had been forced

on the Visitation nuns (*Visitandines*) of St Francis de Sales, much against his will).

Chronologically and canonically the secular Institutes came third. They were more adapted to the apostolate, but had gradually become convinced of the need of consecration, in order to maintain their apostolic fervour. The Holy Office thought of giving them the title 'Religious Sodalties', but Pius XII approved the name 'secular Institute'. At once, Societies of the Common Life, such as *Opus Dei* and the Society of diocesan priests, sought approbation as secular Institutes, as did 'Notre Dame du Travail' which changed from a religious Congregation. These canonical changes were not accompanied by the necessary transformation of spirit; they merely provoked serious crises for these Institutes.

In the Apostolic Constitution of Pius XII, *Provida Mater Ecclesia*, the apostolate in the world of the secular Institute was described as 'supplementary'. The description was in fact taken from a memorandum of the Daughters of the Heart of Mary (*Filles du Coeur de Marie*) in 1880: an Institute 'without habit or common life' founded with the purpose of 'practising faithfully in the world the evangelical counsels, and performing with greater freedom the works of charity which the unhappy circumstances of the times made difficult or impossible for religious families'.<sup>1</sup> The Constitution went on to describe the various effective ways in which these societies could serve the Church and souls:

To lead a real life of perfection always and everywhere, to take up this life in cases where canonical religious life would be impossible or highly inconvenient, to promote the re-Christianization of families, the professions and civil society by the immediate and daily contact of a life perfectly and entirely consecrated to holiness, to exercise the apostolate in a variety of ways, and to fulfil those functions which time, place or circumstances make impracticable for priests and religious. These are the valuable services which can readily be entrusted to these Institutes.<sup>2</sup>

The text is characteristic of the prevailing clericalist and 'religious' outlook on the nature of the secular Institute: its apostolate envisaged as an appendage to the work of priests and religious.

However, a year later Pius XII promulgated a *Motu Proprio*,

<sup>1</sup> *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, xxxix, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

*Primo Feliciter*, as an amendment to the previous document, whose outlook and content were strikingly different.<sup>1</sup> What had happened was this. In the course of a conversation with Armida Barelli, foundress of the Missionaries of Christ the King, Pius XII asked her if she was pleased with the approval granted to her Institute by *Provida Mater Ecclesia*. To the pope's astonishment, she replied that the document did not concern her Institute at all! The result was a completely fresh examination of the question, and the publication of *Primo Feliciter* on 12th March, 1948.

This document declared that secular Institutes were not camouflaged religious, which had got rid of all outward signs of their vocation and continued in private a work which would come out into the open when times 'got better'. No: these were Institutes providentially inspired, having their own place in all times, good and bad alike, founded by a special call of God, different in kind from that of religious Institutes and Societies of the Common Life, with a way of life all their own. 'This apostolate must be faithfully exercised not only in the world, but, as it were, by using the instruments of the world: that is, through the tasks, professions, and forms of life, the places and circumstances which correspond to this secular condition'. It was no longer a question of a supplementary apostolate which happened to be exercised 'in the world', but one fully adapted to all the circumstances of the essentially secular condition.

The process of evolution was to continue, not only through the experience and reflection of authentic secular Institutes, but also through measures adopted by the competent authority. When Fr I. Loew sought approval for his new Institute, it was not approved as a secular Institute. Community life, public action and teamwork were features which placed its members outside the compass of the secular Institutes, where unobtrusive forms of action, professional work, personal commitment and an individual framework of life were the elements that brought into heightened relief this new type of consecrated life. The Worker mission of Sts Peter and Paul (*Mission Ouvrière S Pierre et S Paul*) was instead approved as a Society of Common Life.

This decision revealed an ambivalence which still bedevilled the question. A certain malaise hovered over the secular Institutes, among which a leading column was becoming detached from the

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<sup>1</sup> Some canonists have tried to reconcile the two texts; but such attempts are quite superfluous and irrelevant, when one understands the reasons for the change of approach.

rest. The problem had already come to a head in the 1957 Congress on the States of Perfection, when the secretary of the Congregation of Religious, in discussion with the secular Institutes, had been obliged to meet the demands of an increasingly clear and pronounced secular trend among them, by distinguishing Institutes of 'Collaboration' and of 'Insertion, simple presence and penetration'. This distinction certainly shed light on the debate. The Institutes now designated 'of Collaboration' were closer to religious life, possessed a more pronounced community life, a concerted form of action, common organized works and a canonical status very similar, if not identical to that of the religious congregations. The distinction did not imply disapproval of either group. Nor on the other hand did it amount to approval. It was, however, a division of the secular Institutes into two forms of life. The more secular movement proved to be the stronger. It appealed to *Primo Feliciter*, to its particular charism, to a special vocation, to a particular legislation, and to a style of life which was peculiarly its own. A whole theology was involved in this search for definition: the theology of charity and that of the counsels; counsels lived in a manner which was non-religious, secular, different from the monastic and apostolic Institutes. It was in this latter direction that the effort of the more intransigent and vigorous of the secular Institutes, to achieve a fully secular character, was to be directed.

Then came the Council. It was some time before the secular Institutes could obtain a hearing; and it was only at the last minute that they managed to secure the approval of their particular vocation within the Church.

*Lumen Gentium*, for them, as for many Institutes devoted to the apostolate, came as a bitter disappointment. It was the monastic tradition that found expression in this text: the work of benedictine abbots, and theologians cast in the monastic mould, who conceived the religious vocation as a consecrated life fully separated from the world, wholly concerned with personal holiness, with eschatological sign and ecclesial witness. True, there was a belated reference, in connection with religious vows, to 'other sacred bonds which are like vows in their purpose'.<sup>1</sup> But the assumption here is that the narrower the religious engagement, the profounder the gift of God; which once more casts doubt on the totality of the consecration to God and man in secular Institutes. Further, the conciliar text made

<sup>1</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 44.

no reference to *Primo Feliciter*, with its rich doctrinal formula of 'consecration to God and to souls' (*Deo animabusque*), which reflects the union of the two dimensions of charity in the one act of consecration proper to the life of the evangelical counsels lived to its full in the midst of the world.

More problematic for members of secular Institutes was the fact that *Lumen Gentium*, in defining the special character of the lay state, used the very formulation of their secularity.<sup>1</sup> As one of the Commission's theologians put it, secular Institutes seemed likely to become religious or associations of catholic action. *Lumen Gentium* would certainly have accelerated such a movement, but for the appearance shortly afterwards of *Perfectae Caritatis*.

This decree is concerned, as its title indicates, with the renewal of religious life; it was against their own wishes that the secular Institutes were included in such a programme. Nevertheless, *Perfectae Caritatis* was to modify many of the positions adopted by *Lumen Gentium*, and eventually, though not without difficulty, provided a satisfactory definition of the apostolic, secular character. At the same time, it was still part of a document devoted to 'religious' not secular life. This ambiguity had to be resolved once and for all. To cut a long story short, an amendment was introduced into the text of the decree, on the eve of its solemn promulgation in the Council, to the effect that secular Institutes were not religious Institutes. Let us compare the final text of section 11 of the decree with the draft of 1963.

#### *Perfectae Caritatis*

- a) Although secular Institutes are not religious Institutes, the profession they make in the world of the evangelical counsels is officially recognized as authentic and complete.
- b) This profession confers a consecration on persons living in the world, men and women, clergy and laity.
- c) Their chief aim therefore must be to give themselves wholly to God in perfect charity. Their Institutes ought to preserve that secular character which is proper to their specific nature in order that they may every-

#### *Previous Draft*

- a<sup>1</sup>) Secular Institutes carry with them a true and essentially complete profession, recognized as such by the Church, although lived out in the world.
- b<sup>1</sup>) This profession, truly religious in its substance, confers on those who live in the world, men and women, clergy and laity, a consecration similar to that of other states of perfection.
- c<sup>1</sup>) Their manner of practising perfection supposes that the members of these Institutes live the evangelical counsels in the world. Hence care must be taken that the proper and specific character of these Institutes,

<sup>1</sup> Cf *Lumen Gentium*, 31.

where carry out their apostolate efficaciously in the world, and, as it were, from the world's midst, since it was for this reason that they were founded.

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is both in the world and, in a sense, of the world, in order that all human activities and all forms of life may be inspired by Christ and renewed by him.

their secular character, should not be changed by alien forms. The origin and spread of these institutes is to be sought above all in the demands of a more effective and extended apostolate, one whose exercise

d) At the same time, they must clearly recognize that they cannot fulfil their heavy task unless their members are given a thorough training in the things of God and of man, so that they are truly a leaven in the world for the strong growth of the body of Christ. Their counsellors will therefore have a deep concern about the training of their members, especially their spiritual training, and will take steps to ensure further formation.

d<sup>1</sup>) To attain so difficult an end, the members of secular Institutes must not only keep themselves unspotted from the world (cf Jas 1, 27) but they must also know how to discern amongst the goods of this passing world (cf 1 Cor 7, 31) what is opposed to the cross of Christ, and what is conformed and beneficial to the kingdom of God.

What conclusion are we to draw from all this? First of all, that secular Institutes are not religious Institutes. They are not subject to the law of religious, neither the old nor the new. They are not a *third* state of perfection after religious Institutes and Societies of the Common Life, but an autonomous institution, in which the consecration to God and to souls is complete and authentic: in other words not a diminished or reduced consecration but one which is real, true, total. Their life is not substantially religious – the expression has been allowed to drop – but a consecrated secular life drawing its strength and vigour from its own charism. Their apostolate is secular, exercised not only *in the world* – as moreover is that of so many religious – but *by means of the world*, in every situation which is compatible with this life of consecration in perfect charity.

If the whole of their life is to be an apostolate, and a secular apostolate, it is obvious that their consecration, like their witness, is secular: action from within, working like the leaven in the mass *in view of the building up and growth of the body of Christ which is the Church*. All that has been said of the lay person holds true of the consecrated lay person; but the latter has undertaken to provide, within the laity and the world in which it works, a new life force. The consecration of secular life, fully devoted to God and to men and inspired by a particular vocation, enables it in a discreet manner to uphold and inspire the lay body. The support it offers is all the more sure for being a particular charism and a gift of the Spirit in the Church.

We can therefore speak of a consecrated secular life in the Church without any of that timorous attitude traces of which can be detected in the text of the 1963 draft.

The institutional element in true secular Institutes is fragile, because it is discreet, subsidiary to action and leaves to the members their full personal and professional responsibility. Those in authority are counsellors rather than superiors in the religious sense of the term. Each member has his civil profession, his own responsibilities and opportunities. He lives and acts in his own environment, where he gives his own personal witness. The Institute is there to aid and support its members, provide them with spiritual direction, encourage their efforts, foster their activity, protect their consecration, watch over their fidelity and perseverance, promote a more effective professional formation, suggest ways of increasing their personal competence with a view to making their witness more profound and vital.

Such is the picture that emerges from the conciliar text on the secular Institutes.

The Church has identified herself with this programme and desires to put it into effect. The post-conciliar commission which treats of the consecrated life commends to the Congregation of Religious and Secular Institutes two important norms of approbation and revision. 1) When a new Institute seeks approbation, only those Institutes will be recognized as secular which are secular in the true sense. Those which are not will be invited to select some other canonical status. 2) With regard to secular institutes of priests, these can include in future only diocesan priests incardinated into their diocese.

A further word on the subject of secular Institutes of clergy will be in place at this point. Here, too, the central issue is the proper understanding of the secular vocation. The diocesan priest who belongs to a secular Institute must remain tied to his particular situation, namely that of collaborator with his bishop as a member of the diocesan clergy. His secular quality must be understood primarily in this sense. But the forms in which the priestly secular vocation finds expression are at present evolving: the main direction is already indicated in the conciliar texts themselves. Although the priest is certainly a man set aside for the service of God in the apostolate, his apostolate needs to become less isolated from the milieu in which it is exercised. To be closer to his fellow men, he will become, following the pointers of Vatican II, a 'worker among the workers'.



But this expression must not be understood too narrowly. The working class milieu is not the only one! Every group or district which has a priest would like the relationship with their priest to be closer. Priests, too, wish to be more at the disposition of their people, a concern which is reflected in the desire of many of them to be economically independent of those for whom they work. It used to be a common complaint that the priest was separated from his people: a state of affairs perhaps not unconnected with the fact that the sector of the clergy which has always borne the title of secular has preferred to consider itself 'diocesan' and to avoid the 'secular' aspect of its life, with its necessary involvement with the 'bourgeois' and the worldly. Today, now that the ties between the bishop and his presbyterium have been re-established, it is likely that the secular character of the diocesan priest will take on more real forms than the canonical structures now admit, of which the designation 'diocesan priest' will be nothing more than a last vestige.

Let us now return to the main question that we have been considering so far. Is the present position of the secular Institutes one of evolution or one of crisis? The question is equally important for the secular Institutes themselves as for those religious who feel that they must become secular Institutes if they are to survive. The foregoing historical survey will have shown that the secular Institutes are certainly in a process of evolution. Provided they remain faithful to their vocation, their secular character will become more and more far-reaching. The diocesan priest will become in a true sense increasingly 'secular', lay people in the secular Institutes increasingly responsive to the demands made by the secular condition upon their consecrated life: a life hidden in God, withdrawn from the realm of common action and the public apostolate of the group as such, to become a presence and witness in the professional life of the world and in the ordinary christian apostolate in the Church.

Are we to speak of a crisis in the secular Institutes? Yes. For many Institutes are secular in name without being secular in fact. Not having understood the demand of their vocation that they enter fully into the world, they live in the world like religious. Such Institutes have started to question themselves afresh on the nature of their mission and the meaning of their consecration and apostolate. Some favour the retention of a common religious life, with group activity under the direction of superiors (sometimes in the belief that such dependence is a requirement of perfection) and joint ac-

tion in works of their own such as schools and other social or charitable institutions.

They are faced with a difficult choice. The decision they make today will determine their future in one of two directions. Either they will become true secular Institutes, or else they will find their place among the modern religious, adapted to the times, who will step into the shoes of the religious congregations which have not been able to renew their spirit. Some of these, it is true, have already signed their own death warrant in renouncing the very essential of their vocation, apostolate and institutions.

Faced with a growing secularization in the world, and confronted by religious who seek an exchange of status, members of the secular Institutes find themselves compelled to examine afresh the demands of their vocation. To check one's bearings is always useful. The future of the secular Institutes cannot be assured unless they remain or become what God wants them to be; truly secular in the sense which the Church so greatly needs in the new secular world which is rapidly emerging.

## II *Outmoded Congregations or hybrid secular Institutes?*

Both men and women religious who desire adaptation turn their thoughts to becoming members of secular Institutes. It is no exaggeration to say that the majority of them are unaware of what a secular Institute is. Many are no better informed about the origins and history of their own congregation; they fail to understand their own particular gift, and have been wanting in solid spirituality. Often they are the victims of that ironing out of spiritual differences for which canon law for religious is directly responsible.

The desire for secular status is neither a new grace of foundation, nor a new vocation. To become a secular Institute will bring no solution to their problems, nor will it guarantee their survival. The evidence seems to point the other way, and to suggest that religious congregations which lack a spirit of their own and attempt to transform themselves in this way are likely to finish up among the has-beens. As secular Institutes they can only be of inferior quality.

The first question that needs to be asked concerns the nature of religious life. The most equivocal of concepts, rooted in scholastic theology, the 'religious life', means the profession of the three evangelical counsels. Thus conceived, religious life has existed only in the more complex forms of institution. It has a long history whose origins lie in a cenobitic way of life entailing separation from the world,

solitude, office in choir, cloistral observances, the monastic habit, common poverty, obedience and a dependence extending to the smallest details on an ever-present superior, the abbot of the monastery.

This image of the religious life has come to be regarded as the ideal of the religious state. Every adaptation throughout the centuries which has weakened the bonds or widened the observances of traditional monasticism in the interest of the apostolate has been judged as infidelity to the origins. Today this mentality is still very much alive. Religious dedicated to works of charity have sought to unite monasticism with apostolic action. They have led a double life, a 'mixed' life, seldom properly balanced. The balance they sought could have been achieved only in the union of prayer and action in *one* fervent apostolic life embraced for the love of God and men in institutions accommodated to their apostolate.

It was the wish of the Council that religious should renew their efforts to attain this ideal. Section 8 of *Perfectae Caritatis* declares that they should unite in *one life* the two essentials, namely, interior life and apostolic action. Such union supposes the compenetration and interaction of spiritual life and apostolic activity, the apostolate drawing strength and inspiration from an inner life whose fervour is itself engendered and sustained by the experience of action.

This of course is an entirely theoretical statement of a harmony that has to be achieved in reality. The problem that faces religious today is to translate the theory into terms of life, institutions and works. When religious raise the question of becoming secular Institutes, it is necessary to examine the real meaning of such a step. For given that secular Institutes have a charism and mission of their own, their own particular form of spirituality, it would be a little surprising if religious Institutes should discover overnight that they, too, could count on the same graces.

Yet there are many religious who regard such a change as nothing more than an alteration of structures. In fact, to transform an authentic religious Institute into a true secular Institute is tantamount to making a new foundation: a course that can hardly be embarked on simply as a means of 'adaptation', for reasons of convenience or efficiency, or to resolve a conflict between diocesan authorities and a religious Institute desirous of renewal.

Hence, religious should be clear about what they really mean when they talk of becoming secular Institutes. In many cases, they are voicing a need, which is more and more keenly felt, to be released

from an undue separation from the world. They work in the world, there they practise a civil profession in the realm of charitable action, teaching or nursing. Their lives cannot be governed by the principles and observances appropriate to the cenobitic life, sequestered from the world in silence and solitude to give a witness that is rightly expected of monks and enclosed nuns. Again, they seek to be set free from outmoded observances, undue controls, excessive dependence on the diocese. Today, men and women consecrated to God cannot accept that their religious consecration should become an obstacle to the apostolate, diminish their rights of initiative, deprive them of a legitimate responsibility in the Church. In their wish for a consecrated secular life they proclaim their desire to enjoy the prerogatives of lay people while surpassing them in apostolic action, thanks to a new style of work, simpler and yet more vigorous than the old, and all the stronger for a common spirit, a specific spirituality, and the support of the team.

Aspirations of this sort are by no means exaggerated. One can only regret that we had to wait so long for the religious Institutes of apostolic life to discover the authentic ideal of their way of life, obstructed in the past by a cloistral regime rendered increasingly irksome by overwork, lack of recruitment and the criticism directed at religious sisters by the clergy.

Hence at the root of the desire of many religious to live as a secular Institute lies the rejection of a too rigorist conception of religious life, a conception that exalts personal sanctification to such a degree that the apostolate assumes the rank of a merely tolerated subsidiary or exceptional activity. Certain writings, even in recent times, have placed an excessive emphasis on the exclusive love of God, personal sanctification and separation from the world. Any Institute of apostolic life can only repudiate such positions and deplore the practical consequences they imply.

For many religious, the life of the secular Institute spells the removal of that barrier in modern apostolic activity, the outdated, cumbersome religious habit with its medieval associations. It would mean the exchange of a stifling common life for a more personal style of existence. Human contacts would no longer be falsified by convent ritual, timetables would make proper allowance for rest and recreation, and take full account of the real demands of apostolic work, such as visiting and giving help or counsel.

A further motive for the suggested change is the desire to enter the ranks of the laity, in the hope of preserving more easily an

authentic consecration to God in the essential demands of life, without the continual conflict with a certain breed of clergy who consider it their right to demand any type of co-operation and assistance from people whose life, ideals and action they have done nothing but criticize, and whose spiritual quality they consistently underestimate. Again, there is the desire to be out of reach of those pastoral collaboration schemes which claim to further the promotion of religious women, but in fact show complete disregard for their ideal of consecrated life and the charism of their foundation, by making them 'female curates' in the service of a clergy whose own concern is with the more evident, material forms of work, especially in the social field, rather than with a truly priestly ministry.

Lastly, we may mention a wholly illusory promise which the status of secular Institute appears to hold for religious. After twenty years of unremitting disparagement of the secular Institutes, many religious sisters are now persuaded that 'secular' vocations are more numerous, more serious and more generous than religious vocations. This is a mistaken opinion and prospects derived from it must be dismissed as a mirage.

For many young religious then, the life of the secular Institute is apparently the answer to some of their deepest longings: to be able to choose the apostolic work best suited to their talents and aptitudes, to be free from a system of 'organized' works where the individual, caught up in an all-pervasive obedience, is subordinate to policy, where responsibility is the preserve of those in authority and initiative limited to the confines of obsolete traditions inimical to truly creative action.

From a consideration of these motives two conclusions emerge. First, that the profound malaise they reveal is the result of real and serious difficulties. Religious today aspire to a style of life and action which belongs to the present. They are concerned to make the best use they can of the gifts of God and are not prepared to constrict their action to structures that have lost their apostolic purpose. In all this, there is no desire to undermine the essential meaning of religious consecration; the aim is simply to make it acceptable to a world which sets so much store by 'technical' efficiency. Nevertheless a word of caution is necessary. For nothing has obscured the essential character of religious consecration in the 'active' congregations so much as this pre-occupation with efficiency and results; especially when it is coupled with an alleged concern to improve the status of religious women by incorporating them into forms of

apostolate in which the clergy are losing interest and which they are eager to hand over to nuns: visiting families, work with young people, teaching catechism, routine catholic action.

A second conclusion is also unavoidable. Nothing among these various motives implies a call to the secular apostolate to which the true secular Institute is dedicated. Let us recall once more its essential features. It consists of isolated individuals, gathered into a confraternity which is purely spiritual. Their activity is full-time professional work, which often excludes any direct apostolate. Their purpose is to be present in a dechristianized or hostile society, making it ready for the gospel, accepting and embracing the apparent ineffectiveness of the leaven in the mass, the seed of life. Their witness is a discreet and self-effacing witness that avoids the direct challenge but stands as a question to the world.

After hearing the case put forward by those religious who wish to change their congregations into secular Institutes, one can only conclude that they do not know what a true secular Institute is today. They quite rightly seek the renewal of their religious life. But they would be gravely mistaken in turning outmoded religious Institutes into inferior, hybrid imitations. Such bodies unfortunately exist. They can most aptly be described as religious Institutes in disguise.

#### *A critical survey of traditional religious life*

It cannot be denied that the comparison between religious and secular Institutes can help the religious to lay bare the roots of his own problem. Religious congregations, which, if they have not openly criticised have at least ignored these 'new arrivals', would do well to get to know them. And this for two reasons: first, to arrive at a clearer appreciation of the nature of their own role – neither monk nor secular, but apostolic religious; secondly, to draw inspiration from another type of religious experience for their own renewal.

Those who know the secular Institutes and compare them with religious congregations founded in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries soon become aware of certain shortcomings among the latter. They may be listed as follows: a lack of a developed spirituality, diminishing returns for their work, a lack of formation, of ecclesial life, and of vitality. These are all, of course, closely interconnected.

*Lack of spirituality.* This defect has been frequently noted. Most modern religious congregations were set up to minister to the urgent

needs of ordinary people. Founded in many cases by zealous parish priests, they have been content to practise devotions, while failing to penetrate the underlying doctrine. Certain congregations have suffered spiritual impoverishment in a number of other ways. Institutes have been encouraged to merge, with a resulting loss of specific spiritual traditions. Congregations which formerly possessed a genuine spiritual richness, together with institutions of their own, were deprived of all this by the obligatory application of the Code of Canon Law for religious. One cannot insist too strongly on the harm done by this imposition of uniformity on the lives of free associations in the Church.

*Diminishing returns.* Many works of charity and mercy, instituted more than a century ago, have now lost their importance: rather in the same way as numerous once flourishing confraternities and sodalities have disappeared. Nevertheless, the credit side of the balance should not pass unnoticed. In fact, religious congregations have steadily adapted themselves to modern techniques, and they cannot be too highly praised for doing so. Little or nothing has been said of that progressive evolution which has enabled them to maintain an important role today in the care of the sick and in both ordinary and specialized education. An unbiased judgment will recognize that religious congregations, so often unjustly decried, have made more significant adaptations than the diocesan and parochial institutions which are often their sharpest critics.

*Lack of formation.* Perhaps this is the most delicate point to discuss. The lack of religious formation has contributed cruelly to the imbalance that marks the religious lives of many non-clerical congregations. The responsibility for this state of affairs lies at several doors: often priestly assistance has been lacking. The generosity of religious brothers and sisters has always been praised, but generosity is no substitute for competence. And it is competence in the spiritual order which is most keenly wanting. Efforts have been made for many years to meet the growing demands of professional work. It was not thought necessary to balance a university education with a knowledge of the christian faith and revelation, of catechetics, of the moral doctrine, institutions and history of the Church; all of which would in its turn be of university standard. Young people coming into religion had already received an apostolic initiation in catholic action movements. They failed to find in religious life the formation

which would assist the normal development of their apostolic attitudes and potential. This imbalance has had more part in the decrease of vocations than is normally supposed.

*Lack of ecclesial life.* The lack of spiritual formation was to bring with it a certain alienation of the religious congregations from the general life of the Church. Invited at one point to participate in the catholic action movement, but rapidly brushed aside, the religious Institutes have lived in a certain isolation which resulted in a further fall in vocations, an increase of work, and a growing unease brought about by lack of information from outside. Their failure to adjust themselves to the times provoked hostility first among the clergy, then, and in a more violent form, among militant lay action groups. In consequence, they became still further estranged from the rest of the People of God. The situation in which certain congregations have lived in recent years is thus readily understandable. The renewal movement, initiated by the Council and welcomed by the great majority of their members is a sign, perhaps too long in coming, of a real but hitherto unseen vitality.

*Lack of vitality.* This reproach cannot be made without qualification. As we have already seen, religious Institutes, especially lay, have evolved to a remarkable degree and have adapted themselves in the field of their professional work with considerable success. Had higher studies in theology not been largely closed to them, their achievement would have been greater still. If the religious congregations are to be reproached with lack of vitality, it is rather in the sphere of apostolic action, especially the direct apostolate. In recent times, the Church has become more missionary in her outlook, and the religious congregations might surely have been more alive to the new apostolic needs. At the very least, they might have extended a more welcoming attitude to new movements with the Church and shown readiness to collaborate with them. The blame for this lies with theology. What has been lacking is a theology of the consecrated life dedicated to the direct, public apostolate. The richness of section 7 of *Perfectae Caritatis*, on the Institutes devoted wholly to contemplation – and these are not exclusively feminine Institutes – and the doctrinal depth of section 11, which sets forth the ideal of the secular Institute, afford a striking contrast with the imprecision that emerges from section 8 on the Institutes devoted to apostolic work – the most numerous in the Church and perhaps the most



neglected. Why this deficiency where apostolic religious are concerned? In the past, the form of consecrated life devoted to the apostolate was that of the mendicants; but Franciscans and Dominicans have been more concerned with nuns of their own second orders than with the congregations that derive their inspiration from their spirit. Again, the doctrine of the 'mixed' life proved unequal to the task of bringing a harmonious solution to the problems of the apostolic congregation, while at the heart of a certain theology of the active vocation there lay an implicit disparagement of such forms of religious life. The Society of Jesus, too, is not free from blame. Too little concerned with the religious Institutes which have derived from its own tradition all that is best in their own consecrated life, they have left many such Institutes, especially the non-clerical, tied to monastic patterns of thought which have held up their development and impeded their spiritual renewal. And surely the point that section 8 of *Perfectae Caritatis* is seeking to express is precisely that key principle, *contemplativus in actione apostolica*, which has brought balance and harmony to the Ignatian ideal in a mobile, missionary priestly life, as St Ignatius himself conceived it and as it was fully lived outside his colleges and institutions.

To sum up: the task that faces us is to arrive at an understanding of the real nature of the religious life dedicated to the apostolate, a life of such immense value to the Church and society. Such a life is neither the monastic life, enclosed by its very nature, nor the consecrated secular life whose action, in the discretion and ineffectiveness which it accepts and wills, is that of the leaven hidden in the mass. These latter forms of life have one feature in common, essential to their fruitfulness: both, if they are to be true to their gift, must renounce those forms of action which are outwardly effective, and especially the direct action so often interpreted as apostolic conquest.

*Institutes of consecrated life dedicated to apostolic action*

The renewal of religious congregations supposes as a first principle fidelity to the charism of their foundation. Today, religious are compelled to specify what this grace is, and their success in doing so will be of decisive importance for their future. Such an investigation calls for prayer and prayerful reflection. It is hardly the work of those assemblies whose main object is to discover how the Institute can become more efficient. To define mission, and to give this expression in flexible structures capable of continual adaptation and

of contributing to the properly balanced interior life which is the essential basis of the apostolate: such is the task of the religious congregation in search of renewal.

The Council has already pointed the way. For the apostolic Institute, self-definition must be in terms of the end for which such Institutes exist: love of God through the service of others, dedication to one's neighbour which is also encounter with God and response to his call. The perfect charity of Institutes vowed to the apostolate cannot dissociate the two commandments. On the contrary, they must strive continually to blend the two into a single unified response, which will be reflected in turn in their lives and work. The monastic '*solī Deo*' cannot be the norm of their charity. Certainly, God will always be the greater, the first to be served; but he will not be, as he is for the contemplative, the sole object of their striving, the one end of their life. It is one thing to love one's neighbour in God, another to love God in the love of one's neighbour. The difference of emphasis is important.

This service of others is a ministry of the Church, initiated and sustained by a charism. It does not form part of the hierarchical ministry which constitutes the structures of the Church, but is at the service of these living structures by intensifying their life. This point might profitably be developed. It means, for example, that if the ministry of an Institute is priestly or diaconal, it will have to find in the renewal of its consecrated life a special strength to accomplish its *functional ministry in the Church*.

Hence, interior life and apostolate make a single whole, and it is essential to find a balance between its various elements. This supposes the adaptation of institutions to the end in view: more flexible timetables, an extension of personal responsibility, a more direct, often more individual apostolate. A monk can give hospitality in the name of his monastery: his action protects the silence and solitude of his brothers. The religious consecrated in an apostolic Institute acts in his own name, inspired, certainly, by the spirit of his Institute, sustained and formed by it: yet in the service, not of the Institute, but of men, for the building up of the Body of Christ.

Full account must be taken of such differences. The member of an apostolic Institute is not a monk who performs a part-time supplementary apostolate. By his very consecration, he gives himself entirely to God. It is on the basis of these principles, and in complete fidelity to its own charism, that each Institute must undertake its own renewal. Questions of detail will then find their solution in

full accord not only with the needs of the day but also with the enduring demands of the foundation of each Institute, which is the gift of the Spirit to his Church.

It will require discernment to perceive the real demands of an apostolic religious life. The term 'religious life' retains its ambiguity. It applies to monks and enclosed nuns, as well as to all those who belong to Institutes dedicated to apostolic work. These Institutes range from orders and congregations to Institutes of Common Life, known as apostolic societies. These latter, provided they maintain the fundamental unity between the gift of God and the service of others, are in the true sense Institutes of perfection. They are to be distinguished from a number of missionary societies which are devoted to missionary work without promoting explicitly the life of perfection of their members. They gather together priests or lay people in the service of the apostolate, but they are not on this account Institutes of perfection. Indeed they have no wish to be considered as such. The distinction is becoming increasingly plain.

There is, however, no reason why one should not expect a more flexible legislation which, following the lead of the decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, would recognize the religious life as a *free* association in the Church. Such legislation would safeguard the *internal autonomy* of these Institutes by giving priority to the *particular law* over common law. The latter would then be restricted to certain *necessary rights of intervention* on the part of the responsible hierarchy, such as the approving of Institutes, the recognition of works undertaken by them, the canonical dismissal of their members. All the rest would fall under the particular law. Institutes dedicated to the work of the apostolate – Orders, Congregations, Societies – can hope for that freedom which will allow them to be themselves in the Church. It is desirable that they should be informed of this. They will then be less constricted in their task of adaptation, and relieved of much uncertainty with regard to its realization.

With such considerations in mind, we can predict in general terms the lines along which religious and secular Institutes will develop. A clarified theology of religious life will distinguish between two types. Institutes devoted exclusively to contemplation, and those devoted to apostolic work. Monasticism will become increasingly contemplative; apostolic Institutes increasingly adapted to the apostolate and liberated from monastic elements. The ideal of the 'mixed life' will become gradually more unsuited to a world demanding mobility of action.

The process of adaptation by which apostolic Institutes will enter fully into their active role will be of great benefit to secular Institutes. Their own role will then become clear: presence and individual action, the silent apostolate of witness. Those secular Institutes which enjoy canonical approval but without possessing a truly secular character will be invited to change their canonical status. Their very structures constitute an increasing obstacle to secular vocations. The point is borne out by the experience of the secular branches of certain religious congregations, which have all felt the need in recent years to break free from the direction – the ‘tutelage’ as some express it – of religious superiors who have no understanding of their lives and action; all they wish for is to maintain a spiritual connection with the founder and with a religious family united in one spirit of charity. Several Institutes have preserved three branches: monastic, apostolic and secular. Again, developments in the latter have compelled such Institutes to reconsider their institutions and to grant complete autonomy both to the contemplatives and to the seculars.

### *Conclusion*

Our conclusions may be briefly summarized. A religious Institute dedicated to the apostolate can be tempted to believe that by becoming a secular Institute it is adapting its life to the needs of the day. By adopting such a course it could well destroy the very roots of its life. The majority of religious Institutes are unaware of the developments that have occurred among the secular Institutes; and they fail to understand what a secular Institute is today. The change of canonical status that they envisage amounts to a renunciation of their own charism, to satisfy a fashion or to find an easy solution to extremely complex problems.

By coming to see what true secular Institutes are, they will be able, we consider, to arrive at a better understanding of the essential elements of their own life: public apostolate, community, coordinated action, witness in the Church. The adaptation required of them today is an invitation to achieve as rapidly as possible what might have come about in the course of a normal progressive evolution, unfortunately obstructed in the sixteenth century by the legislation on obligatory enclosure for religious of every order and every type. The theology enshrined in thomist distinctions, and the requirement of solemn vows as essential to this consecration to God, have further delayed the evolution of the consecrated life. All that

is now past history. In 1900 Leo XIII approved of Congregations with simple vows. The Code of 1917 took account of societies imitating the religious life. In 1947, Pius XII recognized the secular Institutes. So far the development had been purely canonical. The Council turned a new page by distinguishing, in *Perfectae Caritatis*, not canonical structures but charisms or vocations: life devoted entirely to contemplation, life devoted to apostolic work, consecrated secular life. It is around these three charisms that the renewal of the consecrated life must be thought out. A religious Institute which seeks to be a secular Institute is confusing adaptation with charism: a confusion in which it is more likely to lose its life than to find it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The author of this article is presently preparing another on apostolic religious Institutes, which should be of particular interest to religious women and to brothers.