

THE NORMS OF THE SECULAR VOCATION

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THAT THE Congress of Secular Institutes held at Rome between 20th and 26th September 1970 should have brought to light a wide range of differences was to be expected: diversity is a sign of the Spirit. But there were also surprises. A number of the older Institutes, once looked upon as models of a new form of consecrated life, were not represented. On the other hand, many of those who did attend arrived in a plainly defensive mood. One could sense among them an uncertainty as to whether they were genuine secular Institutes at all.

As the Congress gathered momentum and the various Institutes learned more about one another, this mood of uncertainty gave way to a mounting awareness that the majority of those present possessed many basic things in common, and notably that they were sharers in the same search and in the same gift of the Spirit. A common outlook was nowhere more apparent than in the acclaim extended to those speakers whose approach was uncompromisingly 'secular'.

The idea of a truly secular vocation is a notable feature of the Church today. There can be no doubt that the prompting of the Spirit is behind it and that we have to do with a gift of God to the Church in the modern world. But a gift to the Church entails demands on the Church. If the secular vocation is going to flourish, it can only be with the understanding and collaboration of three main sectors of the people of God: the theologians, the hierarchy and the secular Institutes themselves.

Secular Institutes and the theologians

Theologians need to be fully aware of the inherent defects of a theology of religious life that was current before the second Vatican Council. This theology was founded on an abstract idea of religious life as such, an idea considered to apply equally to all religious Institutes. Such an approach is inadmissible because it does not correspond to the real situation. There is no such thing as religious life as such! All that exists is a wide variety of quite distinct Insti-

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utes. The neglect of this has had serious and far-reaching effects on both monastic and apostolic Institutes. It is the reason behind the official suppression of many vital differences between religious families in the Church. It has been particularly detrimental to the development of the secular vocation.

In fact, we can distinguish three main approaches to the question 'What constitutes religious life?' Of these, the first two, originating as they do in an over-abstract theology, are seriously defective.

One group would include under the term 'religious' any association whose members live according to the three evangelical counsels. This view raises a fundamental difficulty. For a 'religious' is also one who belongs to a state of life distinct from that of the secular clergy and of lay people. If the counsels were the defining characteristic of the religious state, it would follow that those who are not religious either cannot or should not observe them. Why this should be so is not made clear. The counsels in themselves are neither more nor less than the highest objective expression of charity. The quest for perfect charity in any state of life should therefore tend naturally towards the counsels.

For a second group, what constitutes the religious state is the vows themselves. Commitment to the counsels, on this view, is always a matter of vows, by which a life is given to God as a continual act of spiritual worship. However, there is an assumption here that runs up against the facts of history. For at one time there was a monastic life without vows, and monks have taken too little account of the light that this feature of their origins has to cast on the understanding of their vocation. No one would deny that monks are religious, but what makes them religious is a question that calls for closer consideration.

In contrast with both these approaches, the third group interprets the term 'religious life' in an extremely restricted sense. On this view, true religious life is that of the community which withdraws from the world to live exclusively for God. No one, then, can lay claim to the title 'religious' on the sole grounds of belonging to a group, even a group characterized by community of goods and work. What properly constitutes the religious life is separation from the world, whether the world in its sinful aspect or the world of civic society. The aim of the religious is to be liberated from the *negotia saecularia*, from the occupations, interests and cares of this world. To attain this end, he severs even his ties with the local christian community. This ideal of the eschatological community finds expression

in monasticism. The monk is one who has chosen to devote himself wholly to God and to live in the desert.

The monastic ideal has exerted a profound influence on the theory and practice of consecrated life. So much so that there has been a tendency to forget that it was not the first form of consecrated life in the Church and that the original inspiration of many Institutes – indeed, a majority – was not monastic. This becomes clear only when we consider the distinction between two main traditions in apostolic consecrated life, one closely modelled on the monastic pattern, the other marking a definite break from it.

The first is known as the ‘mixed life’. This is the ideal of the order of preachers, under whose influence it came to be adopted by the sons of St Francis. The theology of it was worked out by St Thomas Aquinas – who also gave it the name of ‘religious life.’ In essence, it is a monastic life mitigated to allow for a specialized apostolate: *contemplata aliis tradere*. Thanks to institutional structures, apostolate and contemplation were established in a living harmony which was able to endure for centuries and came to be seen as the model and perfect form of the *vita religiosa*.

A break from this approach comes with St Ignatius Loyola, whose purpose was to consecrate himself to Christ in the Church under the direction of Christ’s vicar. For him, all was subordinate to this end. The evangelical life became fully apostolic and the counsels acquired new implications arising from a new context. For all these reasons, Ignatius was not a religious in the sense defined above.¹ For him, the three vows are not monastic vows. His community is fraternal, but not cenobitic, not patterned on the established rhythm of choral office and the conventual eucharist. For Ignatius, there are no monasteries, only houses, no abbot or conventual prior but a *praepositus* (one in charge) delegated by the pope, who alone in the beginnings of the Society disposes of its members and has the power to send them to the missions.

The term ‘religious’, then, does not embrace all who live the three counsels in an institute approved by the Church or all who follow Christ according to a charism approved by the hierarchy as a rule of life. Religious do not include all who engage themselves by vow. The religious is one who separates himself from the world in a ritua-

¹ The Society of Jesus is not a secular Institute and could only become one at the price of betraying its founder’s charism. The latter unquestionably involves a *public* mission, whether by preaching, the administration of the sacraments or any other means suited to promoting and expanding the christian faith in the world.

lized cenobitic or conventual life centred on the praise of God, reaching its highest expression in the celebration of the liturgy and witnessing to the reality of the city of God and the expectation of Christ's return.

The apostolate on the other hand has placed the consecrated life on an ever closer relationship with the people, the world and the culture which make up its setting. As well as employing the techniques necessary for the temporal works of mercy, it draws on the full resources of human culture in order to translate and put forth the gospel message in a manner adapted to the milieu and the life and action of men.

It is this adaptation which has been carried to its furthest consequences in the advent of a new form of consecrated life, one which springs from the gifts of the Spirit which the Church has only been ready to receive in recent times. This is the Institute of full secularity which renounces all public and direct apostolate in order to safeguard and strengthen the complete integration of its members into the world.²

Secular Institutes and the hierarchy

The traditional role of the hierarchy has tended to be one of prudence and discernment. It is fairly rare to find the hierarchy at the origin of some new or audacious apostolic venture. The impression clearly emerges from the history of the Church that the hierarchy has left it to the founders of consecrated life to bring fresh remedies to the needs of the world and to meet the particular requirements of its evangelization. Certainly, bishops have exercised a major influence in the life of the Church and one which is still growing in importance, but facile exaggerations must be avoided. Consecrated life was neither initiated nor given its organization by the hierarchy. It must be recognized moreover that the hierarchy has not always understood the more novel or venturesome features of this life, and has failed on occasion to discern the marks of divine providence in the mission and charism of its founders. The secular Institutes have had more to suffer on this score than other groups of consecrated life. Even very recently, they have been given cause for concern by the lack of understanding shown them by those entrusted with the direction of ecclesial life. In view of this there is nothing

² It should be noted that this apostolic secular quality in no way implies the desacralization of the christian faith.

surprising about the warm approval extended by the Institutes to the first of the Congress's proposals: that the secular Institutes be completely withdrawn from the competence of the Sacred Congregation for Religious.³

The purpose behind this move was to bring clarification to an ambiguous situation. 'Consecrated life' refers to a gift of God and a response to his call; but the term tells us nothing of the content of this life. This can take many forms. In some instances the form is monastic; most frequently it is apostolic, as in all institutes dedicated to a priestly, charitable, parochial or social mission. In the secular Institute, on the other hand, consecrated life is completely secular. It admits neither separation from the world nor common works. Members of secular Institutes really belong to the secular milieu. They are in the fullest sense lay people or diocesan priests. They adopt in their entirety the civil, professional, domestic and social responsibilities which make up the world of ordinary men and women. Hence, if the charism of the true secular Institute is not to be lost, it needs to be given its own distinct place in the life of the Church, one which will safeguard the qualities of discretion so essential to its mission.⁴

Moreover, the fact needs to be recognized that the content of the evangelical counsels is not exhausted by the forms they take in monastic and apostolic life. There is a christian poverty which finds expression in the administration of inherited property, in professional activity, in personal gain, in the investment of capital and in a life style which accepts the demands and conventions imposed by a particular social milieu. Equally, the obedience of consecrated life

³ Responsibility for the secular Institutes has been entrusted to a section of the Congregation set up for the purpose – and hence the modified title of Sacred Congregation of Religious and Secular Institutes. As anyone will know who has consulted the secular Institutes on the subject, this arrangement hardly corresponds either to the needs of the secular Institutes or to their position in the Church. The coupling of their name with that of the religious Institutes inevitably suggests a relationship between the two which the secular Institutes refuse to acknowledge, *viz.*, that the secular Institute is no more than a form of religious life adapted to its ultimate limits to meet the needs of the world. It cannot be too strongly emphasized that the history of consecrated life is not one of uninterrupted evolution but includes radical departures from previous tradition. One instance of this is provided by Ignatius, another by the fully secular Institutes.

⁴ The mission of the secular Institutes is secular in essence. It confirms the consecration of baptism while establishing it in the realm of ordinary life. It does not have the 'hierarchical' character conferred upon Catholic Action in its early days and still emphasized in certain countries by the doctrine of the episcopal mandate entrusted to the lay members of this type of association.

has its own embodiment in the secular Institute. Even with the current emphasis on sharing and co-responsibility, the community life of the apostolic Institute makes demands in the way of dependence and submission which would not be admissible in a secular Institute. The latter is a quite different and far more flexible form of consecrated life, and its obedience is an obedience to God in the situations of life itself – in a professional life for which each member is alone responsible and a social life rooted in his secular milieu.⁵

This is why it is so important for the Church, both its pastors and the faithful, to appreciate what the secular Institute is. Vocations inspired by divine providence have their specific characteristics and limitations. Parishes are not entrusted to hermits; one whose charisma is for preaching would not normally be persuaded to take a job as a bank clerk. Similarly, members of secular Institutes should not be asked to play a role in the Church out of keeping with the qualities of their vocation that we have outlined above. To persuade them to abandon their own milieu, their profession or the particular way they belong to the world with the discretion which this entails, would be to divert the course of their consecrated lives. And perhaps the point is worth making in this connection that membership of a secular Institute is not in itself a qualification for the permanent diaconate, and that a woman consecrated to secular life in the world is not necessarily the ideal member of a Catholic Action group.

Official misunderstanding can make it difficult for the secular Institutes to follow their true vocation. When secular Institutes are subjected to the episcopal delegate for religious, when they are expected to be present at conferences of religious superiors, they are being virtually equiparated with religious. Too often, 'assistance' is given to them in ways they could well do without, as when the names and addresses of members are made generally available, or the clergy are officially informed of their presence in the diocese. Again, the distinctive character of the secular Institute may well be compromised by holding diocesan meetings for their superiors, a practice which in the larger dioceses necessarily leads to an undesirable degree of centralization.

The assistance which the secular Institutes do require from the hierarchy may be summed up in three major requests.

1. To respect the truly secular vocation. This calls for a knowled-

⁵ Hence the professional life of the members falls outside the direction of those responsible for the Institute.

ge of its history and its particular implications. The idea of a vocation not characterized by direct action does not come easily to us, accustomed as we are to think of the apostolate as necessarily 'visible'.

2. To impose on the secular Institutes no 'supplementary' apostolate. The 'consecrated' character of these Institutes is a standing temptation to authority to demand of them forms of work contrary to their vocation. Yet the nature of this vocation is left in no doubt by the formula employed by Pius XII in the *motu proprio Primo Feliciter*, a formula which has since received the sanction of the decree *Perfectae Caritatis*. The apostolate of the secular Institute is an apostolate 'in the world and through the means of the world'. In the case of the laity this apostolate is to be understood exclusively in terms of a lay apostolate exercised with and among other lay people, just as for priests it excludes all distinctions from other diocesan priests by fictitious incardinations which would place members specifically at the service of the Institute without real dependence on their bishops.

3. To confer approval as secular Institutes only on those institutes which possess a truly secular character. That this course is in line with the mind of the Church today is clear from the address to the Congress by the cardinal prefect of the Congregation for Religious. Judging from the reception given to it, his statement was a source of joy and reassurance for the secular Institutes.

Today, with the world growing increasingly secular and the Church recognizing that her own life and action are involved in this trend, the distinctive characteristics of the secular Institutes, for so long misunderstood, are coming clearly into focus. Furthermore, the hierarchy now acknowledges that it has made mistakes in its dealings with the secular Institutes, and there was a welcome admission of this in the cardinal prefect's address. But such admissions are only significant if they carry with them the will and concern to treat the secular Institutes from now on in a manner which will correspond to the place of their vocation in the proper pluralism of spiritualities, structures and forms of presence to the world. An unbiased reading of the situation will reveal that the charism common to the secular Institutes is as distinctive as the fundamental inspiration behind all primitive monasticism, the motivation proper to the mendicants, the specific apostolate of the unfortunately named 'clerks regular' and the common general mission of modern congregations and missionary societies. Hence each type of institute needs to be placed in its correct relationship to the life of the Church.

Secular Institutes under challenge

It is vitally important that the Institutes themselves remain faithful to the principles outlined in the foregoing pages. The point requires emphasis because their situation today places a number of difficulties in their way.

First, they are unavoidably affected by current developments in the lives of apostolic religious. Many of the latter are setting aside their common works to participate more fully in civil and professional life, especially in the activities of private or state-sponsored educational or medical institutions. Members of secular Institutes are liable to react to such trends in two ways. In some cases, the reaction is simply one of disapproval. Others find themselves a prey to misgivings about what is really distinctive in the secular vocation. Such doubts are particularly evident in a number of secular Institutes whose way of life includes both common works and community life. These today find themselves in much the same position as many religious congregations in which adaptation to the modern situation has taken the form of a markedly more secular style than was considered admissible in the past.⁶ These Institutes can no longer evade a crucial decision: either to throw in their lot with the apostolic Institutes, or to discover the real implications of their secular quality. A clearer appreciation of the secular vocation has already brought many to abandon a style which was too communitarian, and to adopt a properly secular life marked by a more thorough-going and real involvement in the various milieux in which their members live and work. This is genuine progress, and as a result their members are able to bring both more happiness and more fervour to an ideal which in the past had been only inadequately realized.

The second difficulty comes from the world itself. Not only must secular Institutes be truly secular; they must also be truly consecrated. The desire to be indistinguishable from the rest of the laity has its dangers. It can lead members of secular Institutes to form distorted ideas about the nature of their consecration. For some, perhaps, the very notion of being consecrated suggests something of the withdrawal and otherness implicit in religious profession. Certainly, there are members of secular Institutes who, while accepting

⁶ When a religious Institute admits a degree of 'adaptation' which changes it into a *quasi-secular Institute*, there is frequently a rejection of its specific mission and a betrayal of the founder's intention. Adaptation of this sort is basically a confusion rather than a development.

the state of celibacy as an integral part of their lives, exhibit a tendency in many ways to resent being 'tied' by the obligations towards God and the Institute which their vocation entails.

The desire for easy contacts and uncomplicated dealings with others is a subtle temptation. It can bring about both spiritual impoverishment and a certain shallowness of personal relationships. Consecration is both a gift to God and union with others through God. It involves man in that mystery which only faith can glimpse and whose fulness is yet to be revealed. We need fully to recognize that this faith is never easy, and today it is subjected to a severe challenge from our technological world, with its paramount value of efficiency. It is this value which provides the main impetus of the modern world towards that secularism which is essentially the forgetfulness of God and towards forms of secularization which draw us away from the life of faith and union with Christ in the Church.

Thirdly, there is the difficulty of remaining faithful to the counsels. The following of Christ in the complete living out of the gospel makes particular demands in an Institute which imposes no community structure, no strict obligation of day-by-day dependence, no radical act of dispossession in regard to material goods, no subjection to an authority, whether personal or collegial, endowed with power to direct the personal action of members or to commit them to common tasks.

Secular Institutes need, then, to be quite clear about the implications of the counsels in their own lives.

Secular poverty is above all spiritual. It is first and foremost an attitude towards God rather than a definite social style. As a way of life, it is characterized not so much by the abdication of material goods as by the intention to use them to further certain values: interior freedom, effective christian witness, a genuinely disinterested attitude in the realm of professional work, collaboration with human progress and the development of the world.

Similarly with secular obedience, which is an obedience to God that finds expression in the service of man and in concern for the world. Secular obedience knows nothing of direct dependence on a superior, nothing of the detailed obligations of a rule of life. The most remarkable features of the statutes of any genuinely secular Institute are flexibility, insistence on the domestic, professional and social commitments which make up the structure of everyday human life, and the concern to permeate these with an ever growing fidelity to God and surrender to his Providence. Far from placing restraint

on any human contact or initiative, secular obedience is lived primarily in the daily realities of friendship, co-operation and the anticipation of others' needs. Obedience conceived in this way commits the christian to all human activity; and the quality of reticence which is its defining characteristic makes possible a witness which is forceful while never tactless.

Conclusion

The life of a secular Institute as led today is a new departure in the Church and affords ample matter for reflection to theologians and bishops alike. It must be recognized that both the interior organization of these Institutes and the personal activity of their members are subject to quite distinct norms and limitations. It will be helpful, by way of conclusion, to enumerate certain principles arrived at in the often difficult search for the true meaning of the secular vocation.

1. A fully secular quality cannot exist where the public signs of life or action proper to monastic or apostolic life are admitted or maintained: e.g. a distinctive habit, common residences, houses run on conventual lines.

2. The secular quality does not permit of community life on the part of its members even as an option. It is too easy to slip from the notion of a 'group' life to that of a 'common' life inconsistent with the personal liberty and the variety of commitments which the ideal of presence to the world entails.

3. The secular vocation does not permit of common action or particular works, which necessarily call for a concentration of personal energies and the withdrawal of members from their individual social milieux.

4. The secular vocation can remain vigorous and authentic only if the members lead their lives within their own social milieu, exercising full personal responsibility in an ordinary professional calling while observing complete discretion with regard to their consecrated lives and their commitment to the Institute and to its members.

5. Secular commitment does not detach members from their environment, rather it ties them to it more closely. It obliges them to see in this environment not a mere framework of life, but a means of the apostolate, a charge and a new responsibility. For these reasons the consecrated layman must be regarded as *more* 'lay', in virtue of his secular vocation, than the laity themselves.

6. The same principles apply to secular priests. A priestly secular Institute belongs to the *presbyterium* not as an entity but by the indivi-

dual presence of its members. Hence, it would go counter to the very nature of such an Institute to be specifically represented in the priests' council. Furthermore, the secular Institute of priests presupposes real incardination into the diocese, and ordinary collaboration with the bishop, clergy, laity and religious. Aggregation to the Institute must not be a basis for distinctions but should incorporate members more effectively into the community of their fellow priests centred on their bishop.

It would be inconsistent with the secular quality of a priests' Institute to form a community within the diocese, to maintain a seminary for the diocese, or to apply for particular parishes.

7. The secular quality thus leads us to a new conception of what a secular Institute is. The secular Institute is a communion but not a living together, a milieu of inspiration, not a team. An open group, its proper purpose is to promote action outside itself and in collaboration with other people. Its witness is personal, not communitarian, the activity of its members is individual and does not represent the Institute.

A secular quality however is in no way contrary to the spirit of brotherhood. On the contrary, it creates extremely close ties, which find expression in many other ways than obligatory community life, or the physical solidarity of life or action organized on institutional lines. In a secular Institute, the basis of communion is a common ideal of life and apostolate.

The future of the secular Institutes rests, then, in their own hands. The renewal of the Church has been the occasion of a wide variety of gifts of the Spirit, and this can only be reflected in a genuine pluralism. The true secular Institute is a vital factor in this pluralism. But if many of these Institutes are to become truly secular, more will be needed than minor alterations that leave existing structures virtually untouched. There must even be a readiness to call in question approved formulas, for many of these still embody the uncertainty of an initial sounding or a failure to distinguish a genuinely fresh inspiration from previous traditions and styles of life. Institutes wishing to live up to their secular vocation are called today to take the decisive step necessary to translate intention into reality. To withhold this step would be to place their own future in jeopardy, to impede the advancement of all genuine secular Institutes and to undermine the vitality of the Church in the modern world.