

# NOTES TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF THE SECULAR INSTITUTE

By JEAN DE LA CROIX BONADIO

**I**N WORKING with members of the secular Institutes, I have often been painfully aware of the enormous difference between the high quality of their living and the narrow categories used to describe their life. I am convinced that the secular Institutes are satisfying a real need now emerging in the Church's history. Their vocation is born of a simultaneous desire for a total gift to God and a total identification with men: that is, for an authentic christian presence at the heart of everyday life and of ordinary worldly existence.

New vocations are always 'signs' in the Church, seedlings containing within them unforeseen developments. But they can be extremely awkward signs, which do not fit any of the accepted categories. They upset settled ways of thinking, and so provide easy targets for criticism. It may be useful, then, to offer observations chosen at random from pastoral experience – simple and unpretentious notes for reflection. Their purpose will be two-fold. First, to try to show the basic ambiguities underlying investigation into the secular Institutes. Many of the recurrent difficulties of the past twenty years seem to me to be due to a fundamental lack of understanding. These ambiguities can be detected throughout the literature dealing with secular Institutes, which presents the most contradictory opinions even on essential points. Secondly, in a simple spirit of inquiry and as a contribution to the exchange of views, to propose a more 'existential' definition of the secular Institutes, one which may perhaps correspond more adequately to reality.

## *The comparison between religious Institutes and secular Institutes*

From the very beginning, attempts have been made to define the secular Institutes by comparing them with religious life (*pace* the official documents and writings on this subject). This is understandable and to some extent inevitable: they constituted a new

experience, and the existing theology of 'states of perfection' was centred entirely on the religious life. Further, the time of their emergence, in the immediate post-war period, was one of an all-powerful clergy, innumerable religious, and a laity regarded in ecclesial terms as being of minor importance. The comparison had, besides, its more positive aspect: it seemed natural to compare the secular Institutes with the only consecrated state in existence in order to distinguish the one from the other. There were, however, unfortunate consequences. The vocation has never been understood on its own terms, as a call from God; it has always been defined from the outside – by comparison with another vocation. Such a method could never succeed in penetrating to the essential meaning of this vocation. In fact, the comparison remains on the juridical level; so that, among other disadvantages, the secular Institute has never been considered in its own context and habitat – the secular nature of the world, the christian life, and the apostolate of the world. Again, by establishing a comparison between secular and religious Institutes, the problems affecting the religious life were introduced into the consideration of the secular Institutes. This has complicated matters considerably,<sup>1</sup> and is even more of a burden today, in the climate of a radical questioning of the structures and the basic issues of religious life. We must therefore try to escape from this kind of methodology and change the way in which the problem has been formulated.

*The failure to take the living reality sufficiently into account, posing problems at the level of spiritual theology or canon law without seeing them first of all at the level of the Mystery of the Church: that is to say, the tendency to leave aside facts, events, the concrete action of the Spirit in the hearts of men, for the sake of establishing categories.*

Both spiritual theology and canon law are indeed indispensable, but only in so far as they explain and codify an existing reality: they are not a substitute for reality. Man is not made for theology and for law, but both are made for man.

To be precise, we must here underline that the religious state as such does not exist: it is a category. The decree *Perfectae Caritatis*

<sup>1</sup> A typical example is E. Mazzoli's recent book, *Gli Istituti Secolari* (Milan, 1969): 'Indeed, if the new Institutes claim on the one hand to share the religious state by reason of their profession of the evangelical counsels, they appear on the other hand to share the lay state by reason of their secularity. And then the question arises: 'Where do they really belong?' (p 10.)

says that there are many forms: institutes dedicated to contemplation or the apostolic life, institutes of monastic or conventual life, clerical and non-clerical congregations; and for all these forms different definitions have been provided. To speak, then, of the 'religious state', or of the 'substance of religious life', only confuses the issue, because it is an abstraction. If the profession of the three evangelical counsels is an element essential to all the forms, whether mentioned by the decree or not (hermits, mendicants, apostolic congregations, clerics and non-clerics, monks, secular Institutes), one still cannot say that this profession constitutes purely and simply the 'substance' of each of them.<sup>2</sup> It must also be stressed that this profession is possibly identified, modified, finalized, by other elements equally essential, such as contemplation, common life, missionary life and so on.

When one reads what some of the literature has to suggest about secular Institutes, one is led to ask whether at bottom the question is merely one of philosophical formulation. By distinguishing out 'matter' and 'form' or 'substance' and 'accidents', as though these were two 'things', one inevitably reduces vocation to a 'tiny specific difference'. Now on the level of reality, what makes the difference is the whole life of people and of Institutes, their history and psychology, the spirit, the heart. An abstract search for common elements tends to reduce vocation to a mere 'particularity'. We must set aside the categories if we are to express God's call in terms of dedication. The nearer we get to a definition which understands life as an act of personal response, the more true that definition is; we are too often accustomed to abstract, to generalize, to search for the least common denominator, which is obviously the most universal, but also the most dessicated, the most colourless, the least expressive and, in the last analysis, the least true.

---

<sup>2</sup> Whereas Mazzoli insists: 'One is dealing with a state whose members are essentially in communion with religious through their consecration and peculiarly distinct from them by their secularity'. *Op cit.*, p 94.

The Decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, speaking of the Institutes dedicated to the apostolic life, has a quite different perspective: 'In all such institutes, apostolic and charitable activity is of the essence of religious life: for it is a holy service and a work of love which is their own, entrusted to them by the Church and discharged in her name. And hence the entire religious life of their members must be imbued with the apostolic spirit, and all their apostolic activity animated by the religious spirit'. It seems to me that this text shows clearly that if the profession of the evangelical counsels is an essential element in every form of religious life, it still cannot be said that this profession automatically constitutes the 'substance' of them all.

*The definitions given in the official documents are inadequate for us today, even if, at the time, they indicated a definite progress. They are pre-conciliar*

The question today, after twenty years, is quite simply 'What is a secular Institute?' Do the official documents answer the question sufficiently clearly?

a) The definition of *Provida Mater*<sup>3</sup>

This document, in 1947, spoke of a new experiment at a difficult moment in history, with a theology of the consecrated life which had developed along one line only. We wish to emphasize here an important positive fact stated in paragraph XI of this constitution: the equal value given to personal sanctification and to the apostolate. This is a new affirmation.

The definition in *Provida Mater* is by means of a comparison with the religious life; it presents the seculars as a sort of supplement to the religious; it distinguishes too emphatically the two aims: the life totally consecrated to holiness and to the apostolate; it describes the apostolate as multiform (that is, more with a view to the quantity than the quality of the action involved) and as supplementary to the work of priests and religious.

b) The definition of *Primo Feliciter*<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> 'It is highly feasible for these Institutes to achieve great good by really living the life of perfection always and everywhere. They can embrace it in areas where the canonical religious life would be neither possible nor convenient, and so bring about a profound christian renewal of families, professions, and civil society, through intimate, daily contact, through a life perfectly and totally consecrated to holiness; they can exercise a multiform apostolate and ministry in places, times and circumstances which would be forbidden to or difficult for priests and religious'. Constitution *Provida Mater* (2 February 1947), 10.

<sup>4</sup> 'In raising these Associations to the rank of secular Institutes, and in conferring both a general and a particular status on these Institutes, it is necessary to bear in mind that what determines the individual and specific character of these Institutes is their secularity. This is their whole *raison d'être*, and should be in evidence always and in all circumstances. Though nothing should detract from their full profession of christian perfection, based on the evangelical counsels and truly religious in its substance, this perfection must be worked out and expressed in the world, and therefore accommodate itself to secular life in every way possible that accords with the obligation and practice of this perfection.

The entire life of the members of secular Institutes, consecrated to God and professing perfection, must become an apostolate, one which has to be worked out with such purity of intention, such an intimate union with God, such generous forgetfulness and radical denial of self, such love of souls, that the interior spirit which informs it is not only apparent but nourishes and constantly renews it. This apostolate, which embraces the whole of life, must always be experienced in these Institutes so deeply and genuinely that, with the help of Divine Providence, it should seem that this zeal and eagerness for souls has not merely found a fortunate outlet in the consecration of life; rather it has

This document contains more positive aspects than its predecessor. It demonstrates that secularity is the true and specific character of the secular Institutes. Secularity is their *raison d'être*: that is, they exist through a life of consecration and apostolate within the secular world; secularity must always and everywhere be in evidence; it is the point of reference and to some extent the norm of consecration: perfection is linked to it. This definition also demonstrates that the apostolate of the secular Institute absorbs the whole life of the members; it manifests, informs, nourishes and renews the interior spirit; it is the reason for consecration; it has imposed its own laws and character on this consecration, and in a manner of speaking has been its own stimulus; it is an apostolate in the world which also uses the ways of the world (that is, it is determined by the nature of the task).

However, this definition includes some other elements which in our day are seen to be rather negative; and there is a danger that these will give rise to ambiguity. Indeed, they have already been the cause of difficulty. There is the usual comparison between the secular Institutes and religious life, which complicates the issue. The phrase 'substantially religious' is used. Does this mean that the substance of the religious life is found in the secular Institutes, as one, if not the most important, of its elements? Or does it mean that the life of a secular Institute is religious in its substance? Whatever interpretation is adopted, the expression gives rise to problems, even if it signifies simply 'total consecration'; and we must insist again that the 'religious state' as such does not exist: it is an abstraction. *Provida Mater* also fails to clarify the important point that the secular Institutes must not 'teleguide' the members' apostolate, in the sense that the secular Institute does not organize an open and corporate apostolate. The formula, 'in the world using the ways of the world', which for most purposes is the best definition of the secular Institutes, lends itself to differing interpretations. The explanation given in *Primo Feliciter*, 'action within the professions, methods, forms, places and circumstances corresponding to the

---

imposed upon this consecration the very dimension, the particular physiognomy, which its own special and general goals demanded. This apostolate of the secular Institutes must not only be carried out faithfully in the world, but carried through, so to speak, by the means which the world offers, and for that reason must avail itself of the professions, methods, forms, places and circumstances which correspond to these conditions of secularity'. *Motu Proprio Primo Feliciter* (12 March 1948). Section 11 of the decree *Perfected Caritatis* can be interpreted in the same way.

secular condition', is not too clear. It should also be added that the thought of the document is continually watered down with expressions like 'it is usually felt that . . .' or 'to a considerable extent . . .' Finally, today's need is for a more vital vocabulary, which will not foist on us such phrases as 'generic end', 'specific end', 'substance', 'proper and specific character'.

*What is a secular Institute?*

From all that we have said up to now, it is clear that the difficulties and ambiguities relative to the secular Institutes ultimately stem from a certain philosophical and juridical formation and mentality which have not yet been overcome; from an insufficiently developed theology of religious life and of the laity; from a formulation which today gives rise to perplexities, though originally well-intentioned and, in its own time, progressive. It is worth saying that to resolve the difficulties a theoretical clarification is insufficient: a real change of mentality is needed.

In order to facilitate dialogue, we offer here our own description of the secular Institute. *Primo Feliciter* makes great play of three characteristics: *profession of the evangelical counsels, apostolate, secularity*. But equally the document sets all three in a reciprocal relationship: the profession and the apostolate are united in the formula 'consecration to God and to men'; reference is made to profession of the counsels in secular life; it is said that the apostolate should be exercised in the world and through the world, and that the apostolate has led to consecration; it is affirmed that the consecration is of such a kind as to involve the whole of life in the apostolate, and so on. It is the synthesis of these three elements which makes up the definition of the secular Institutes in *Primo Feliciter*. No one element is accorded a privileged position.

To all this I would like to add a fourth essential element, the communitarian obligation (which is certainly not excluded, even though it is not considered, in *Primo Feliciter*).

One may therefore describe a secular Institute as follows:

a) *It is a community*

By this I do not mean common life but a union with a real community to which one can adhere by a voluntary deliberately mature act. The function of the community is to be a place of exchange, of communion, of fraternal and amicable support and refuge; a place for taking stock, for purification, for conversion of mind and heart. Everywhere is a place for this conversion, but it is clear that the

Institute can help in training, in the search for the will of God, in the correction of one another in a spirit of brotherhood, and so on. It is a place of charismatic insertion into the Body of Christ, since, by means of such a group, evangelical and not merely doctrinal values are thrown into relief. These express the rich variety of the gospel message: the kingship of Christ, the sense of work, the sense of the priesthood, hospitality, solidarity with the work, poverty, catechetical instruction and so on.

b) *A community which, following Christ in an absolute and radical way. . .*

The adjectives radical and absolute signify the totality and profundity of the sacrifice. It is not a question of a radical choice before Christ, but before a certain kind of life. It consists, for all practical purposes, in a total consecration, in celibacy and all the other evangelical counsels.

c) *Expresses and lives a fully authentic secularity*

That is to say, in ordinary conditions, in one's normal sociological 'slot', and each one in his own environment (family, profession, social background).

d) *With an apostolic dedication*

The apostolate depends largely on each Institute, on the training it gives, on its vocation; and it may take several forms. Certainly it does not exclude forms indicated by the Council: the apostolate whose aim is to evangelize and sanctify men;<sup>5</sup> charitable activity;<sup>6</sup> missionary activity;<sup>7</sup> christian renewal in the temporal order. Nevertheless, the specific apostolate of the secular Institutes claims to consist in the fact of securing the secular mission: that is, in being more available for the profound re-orientation of temporal values. The very fact of assuming the ordinary conditions of existence (family, profession, dedication to making society more human, more just, more spiritually and even more technically perfect) constitutes a sharing in the Kingdom through the values of creation.

How is this work done? By purifying, setting to rights, illumining and offering up the situations, conceptions, values and structures of the world. It is a quest for the integral development of the cosmos, of humanity, of man. All this, of course, within a christian vision of the world. Thus the secular Institute is truly an expression of secularity and a true service of the Church.

---

<sup>5</sup> *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> *Ad Gentes*, 40-41.

Here, then, is an attempt to define, in the light of the above explanations, the mission and nature of the secular Institute. It is a community which, following Christ in a radical and absolute way, expresses and lives a fully authentic secularity with an apostolic dedication: a community which, by remaining in the ordinary conditions of existence, with each person in his own environment, seeks the re-ordering of temporal values according to Christ and the integral development of the cosmos, of humanity, and of man, using the means suited to the nature of all these.

It will surprise no-one that I should try, even in such a schematic way, to perceive more clearly the true nature of the vocation of the secular Institutes. The Council itself frequently invites us (in connection with the truths of our faith) to 'seek endlessly the best ways to communicate'<sup>8</sup> and to find ever more profound and exact expressions and explanations.<sup>9</sup> This is quite certainly a duty prompted by fidelity, an act of respect for the word of God in the hearts of men, the expression of a just esteem for the different functions of the Mystery of the Church. The problem is not how to classify people in categories like pressed flowers in a catalogue, but to help them to live out their particular vocation most fully. The old bishop of Nola, Paulinus, fifteen hundred years ago gave this fundamental and wise counsel: 'Listen to the holy Spirit beating in the hearts of the faithful'.

---

<sup>8</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 62.

<sup>9</sup> *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 6 and 11.