

# POVERTY IN SECULAR INSTITUTES

By MICHEL DORTEL-CLAUDOT

SINCE THE RECENT *World Congress of Secular Institutes* (in Rome, September 1970) there has been an increased awareness of the different kinds of life possible in these Institutes. In some the members, or at least the majority of them, share a common life, living under the same roof, eating and working together (as in schools and hospitals), and sometimes also pooling their incomes and belongings. But there are other Institutes, and apparently the greater number, where none of this is to be found. Their members usually but not invariably live alone, choose their own work and remain responsible for their day-to-day existence. They keep their wages and pay their own expenses, setting aside some funds for the future or contributing to a pension fund.

Are Institutes of the first kind in some way less secular than the others? They would certainly want to deny that they are and it is not my intention here to try to close the debate on this matter, which at the present stage of theological reflection must remain open. However, in these two kinds of Institute there are quite distinct forms of life. Such a difference is bound to affect the way their members think about and practise the virtue of poverty. It is surely a matter of common sense that obligations with regard to poverty for those with a common life cannot be precisely the same as for those with none.

Here I wish to consider only the second kind of secular Institute, the kind having *no* community life. But this is not to be taken as implying any judgment on the other Institutes; it is merely that I have had, as theologian or canonist, little contact with them in recent years and would prefer to speak of what is more familiar to me.

‘You cannot serve God and mammon’.<sup>1</sup> This commandment of the Lord is addressed to every christian. Are money and material values then evil? No, but they present a danger of so attracting and

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<sup>1</sup> Mt 6, 24.

absorbing the human heart that it is no longer free to turn to God. A reasonable concern for the morrow is legitimate. So also, to want an increase in inadequate wages or to want to put aside some money for one's children. But when love of money and the thirst for luxury distract a man to the point where all aspirations toward the kingdom of God, all hope or charity, are stifled in him, then they have become idols. Wealth is not an evil in itself, but the hold it exerts can eventually become one. Since the good things of this world hide such dangers, every christian has the duty of remaining detached from them, with a free heart. Understood in this sense, evangelical poverty binds all members of the people of God:

All of Christ's followers are invited and bound to pursue holiness and the perfect fulfilment of their proper state. Hence, let them all see that they guide their affections rightly. Otherwise they will be thwarted in their search for perfect charity by the way they use earthly possessions and by a fondness for riches which goes against the gospel spirit of poverty. The Apostle has sounded the warning: let those who make use of this world not get bogged down in it, for the structure of this world is passing away.<sup>2</sup>

The members of secular Institutes remain lay-people.

This is stated in the Church's documents. The point has often been established and there is no need to argue it here again. *The form of poverty proper to a secular Institute can thus only be that to which all christians are called.*

This is why the statutes and constitutions of the secular Institutes insist in the first place on that general interior freedom which is asked of all. Here are some texts:

At the Lord's invitation, having found the hidden treasure the Gospel speaks of, they wish increasingly to dispossess themselves of attachment to various riches and to themselves in order to be free and available.

Members of the Institute commit themselves by a vow to live in gospel poverty, in a spirit of total detachment from all they possess. They live fully in the world as journeying pilgrims, valuing earthly goods as God's gifts but using them primarily to serve men and to reveal his love to them.

Faithful to their special vocation they do not take a vow of poverty but promise a true and complete detachment from all things so as to use the world as if not using it, and as stewards of Christ, devoting all they have to the purposes of his love.

<sup>2</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 42.

Christ came in poverty. He gave to temporal riches their true significance in remaining totally freed in regard to them. We wish our life to be an extension of his and so to be poor, according to the spirit of the Gospel, using material goods without being possessed by them. Whether in easy circumstances or in want, we try to remain both free and joyful.

Similarly, the secular Institutes whose members are chiefly workers by hand or brain and wage-earning are anxious to emphasize that work and its demands, together with the constraints of the modern world, form the raw material of a secular kind of poverty. This theme is present in the following passages:

Working to earn our daily bread is the fundamental basis of our secular poverty. We shall live it out loyally in all its aspects: professional obligations, the struggle for social justice, insecurity of employment, redundancy, unemployment, sickness, retirement . . . In a harsh world of conflicting interests and anonymity, where man is enslaved to machinery and exploited, we shall feel the pressure of such living conditions and learn the painful truth of our dependence and limitations.

By our labour we live in the same insecurity as our brothers: by our poverty we share in the general conditions of human life.

The members of the Institute share whole-heartedly in the life of the workers, with its needs and insecurities. The example of Jesus himself, and the needs of the whole world, spur on their efforts for a better life and their aim of giving to work its meaning of brotherly solidarity and of co-operation with the Creator.

It is for the same general reason that the secular Institutes make the kind of recommendations to their members that could equally well be addressed to any of the laity. The members are asked to bear patiently with material difficulties and privations, accepting their human weakness and limitations in a spirit of poverty:

If our resources are modest, we shall see in that an opportunity to draw nearer to Christ and to the majority of our fellow men. Recalling the desire often expressed by our founder ('If I may not breathe my last on the cross, at least let me die in hospital with the poorest'), we should be willing, if required, to be treated in the same way as the most wretched of the sick.

In the light of the first beatitude, let each strive to accept herself, with her own gifts and limitations. She knows that her poverty will itself increase her appreciation of the divine generosity.

Our poverty should free us not only from material goods but also from ourselves. We accept our limitations and frailties honestly and

without complaining, confident that God acts through such poverty of spirit.

Like any other lay-person, the members of secular Institutes are asked to be available to their neighbour and not to be sparing with their time. They are asked to come to the aid of the most deprived, to share their goods with them generously, to join in social and political action, struggling alongside the poor against the world's injustices. This theme too is present in the constitutions:

If we have several sources of income we should see that as a further invitation to share with others, the poor especially. When budgeting we can allot a certain proportion of our income to be given to the poor. Money earned by our work is not to be used solely for our own purposes; as far as possible we should try to put aside some of it for others, particularly our family, if it is in need.

A member of the Institute will calculate his budget so as to arrive at a fair balance between personal expenses, contributions to the needs of the different groups to which he belongs, and the giving away in alms of what is left (which is for him especially a duty in justice). In arranging her budget she should set aside some money as alms, in proportion to her wage or income. This will be shared out between the Institute's general fund, its own work, and the poor which each member chooses to assist.

In obedience to the gospel precept 'give what remains to the poor', the member should give away all that he does not need to the poor for the sake of the kingdom. This will include what remains after deducting subsistence expenses, and money for future needs or due to one's family or to the Institute itself, either for general or individual needs.

She will freely place herself, together with her time and talents, at the disposal of others.

Acknowledging that our personal gifts are from God, we put them at the service of all, so as to share in their sufferings and joys.

Poverty is to be understood and practised as a way of working for the good of all, and especially for those in most need.

The fruits of the earth are for the good of all men; to keep them for oneself or to fail to work for their better distribution is an injustice. Our poverty requires that we act to promote social justice: that the world should prosper at the expense of the weak is something we cannot tolerate.

The spirit of poverty must also be expressed in constant efforts to rid the world of the scandals of unjust inequality which deny men their due dignity and prevent so many of the deprived from recognizing the face of the Church of the poor.

If I may introduce a personal reminiscence, in August 1969 I was present at the renewal chapter of one secular Institute. The bishop of the diocese paid a visit at the time when they were drawing up the chapter's *Decree on Poverty* and was given a courtesy copy of the text of this decree. When he had read it he turned to me in some perplexity and asked: 'But are they doing anything *more* than the rest of the laity?'

Everyone asks this kind of question about the secular Institutes, so accustomed have we become to understanding the different states of life in the Church in *quantitative* terms. Thus, a religious is regarded as someone who does things which a layman does not do, and a priest things which a deacon cannot. And similarly it is thought that a lay member of a secular Institute ought to be doing things not done by an unconsecrated person. If one fails to get these matters (and especially poverty) into focus, it is easy to conclude that a consecrated secular life lacks point.

'Outward change is nothing, interior conversion is everything': so we are told in the recently drawn-up statutes of one Institute. This seems a good summary of the position of the consecrated secular life in relation to 'ordinary' lay life.

The gospel demands of every christian an interior detachment from material things, trust in the Father's providence when in need, and generous almsgiving whenever possible. The member of a secular Institute does not seek to do otherwise, but precisely in virtue of his commitment to poverty he will strive to do all this with total fidelity.

The member of a secular Institute makes a promise or vow of poverty, so as to bind himself in conscience to an evangelical attitude to material goods. It is obviously quite possible to have such an attitude without making any particular commitment to poverty, but by vocation he has made this commitment as a means to acquiring that attitude because it is found to have certain advantages: an explicit promise keeps one on the alert, stimulates generosity, constantly reminds one of the need to struggle against the possessive instinct and compels one to be more attentive to the needs of neighbours. Genuinely and consciously practised, this commitment to poverty can be for the consecrated lay person an incentive, gradually transforming his natural attitude to material values. There is no external change in his life, which remains truly that of a layman, but there is a total interior conversion.

Keeping a heart detached from material values is a duty for every

christian. A consecrated layman, because of a special commitment to poverty, will wish to take this duty with complete seriousness, conscious that one cannot talk honestly about interior freedom without taking positive steps to acquire it. His commitment to poverty will demand renunciation and hardship. Hence the secular Institutes, while reminding their members of the need to live a fully secular life as regards dress, living standards, culture and leisure, at the same time warn against unreal needs which can be sheer self-indulgence, and against domination by creature comforts. They advise members to preserve a certain simplicity in their style of life. Here are some extracts:

The manner of life should be simple and befitting the social condition of each member.

The standard of living of each member should not be different from that of her surroundings but marked out by an evangelical simplicity and detachment.

Belonging to a given level of society we should accept it as it is, without false shame or pride, adopting the external social forms, yet with a note of simplicity in our choices and avoidance of any unnecessary spending.

In what concerns only themselves they will deny themselves useless expense and waste, preferring what is more poor.

Our style of life will be simple and adaptable. Simple, so that anyone who meets or visits us, rich or poor, can feel at ease. Simple, too, so that we may save as much as possible for others, especially the poorest. Adaptable, however, to our family or professional situation and to the requirements of health and common-sense.

In matters of dress, food and lodgings they should seek simplicity. They will adopt, as far as possible, the conditions of the poor among whom they live, while not endangering their health or work by continual excessive deprivations.

The members of the Institute will normally remain at their own social level. Though their situations differ widely, they should nevertheless practise the same ideal of gospel poverty. Thus each will adopt a simple style of life, reducing his own needs to essentials.

The consecrated lay person belongs to a fraternity and it is as a member of a group, an Institute, that he makes and will live out his commitment to poverty. What then will be the particular function of the Institute and its superiors in this matter of secular poverty?

As I pointed out initially, only those Institutes without a proper community life are being considered here. To live in community

means sharing the same living-space and meals: this in itself requires a certain amount of discipline.

In the religious life, as we know, poverty always entails a certain element of *dependence*. As a religious I am not free to dispose of the fruits of my labours nor of the property of the house. I cannot take them for my own use, nor sell them, nor give them away without permission from my superior, to whom also I submit my personal accounts.

Now, the reason for this dependence is not obedience, as is often wrongly imagined, but the special kind of poverty proper to the religious life, one of whose essential characteristics is *community of goods*. To attain that interior detachment from material things which is imposed on all the faithful, the religious chooses by his vocation the way taken by the christian in Jerusalem: 'No one said that anything he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common'.<sup>3</sup> He hands over to the community his rights over the results of his work. But since at no time do the goods held in common lose their community character, the religious may not dispose of them (beyond certain limits) without his community's permission, expressed by the superior. Like the early Jerusalem christians, religious attempt to form societies where all will be treated as equals. This concern for equality demands that each receive only what he needs from the community. For this reason a religious may not buy, borrow or accept anything from outside without that agreement which it is the superior's function to give or withhold *on behalf of the community*. In the religious life, dependence and a dependent use of goods exist solely because of the common life and community possession of goods.

In the constitutions of secular Institutes drawn up before Vatican II, instructions such as the following occur frequently: a member of the Institute must submit a provisional budget to his president<sup>4</sup> and have it approved; he should furnish an account of his income and expenditure; he should ask special permission to spend more than a certain fixed amount or do any extraordinary administrative action; he must draw up a will, letting the president general have a copy

<sup>3</sup> Acts 4, 32.

<sup>4</sup> In speaking of the person in charge of a secular Institute, it is difficult to find a reasonable english equivalent for the very handy french *le (or la) responsable*. The word 'Superior' is inevitably associated with religious Institutes, and even these, in the modern context, are looking askance at the word. Some english-speaking secular Institutes use 'president' or 'sponsor'. Ed.

and seeking permission before making any alteration to it.<sup>5</sup>

Such rules are not wrong in themselves, arising as they do from a legitimate desire to impose a certain minimum of pressure on the less generous members of the Institute. But do they not suggest an awkward vestige of that *dependence* which is properly religious and only meaningful in terms of community life and goods? If it is thought necessary to keep one or other of these rules so that every member of the Institute will be obliged to do at least *something* in the matter of poverty, it must be clearly emphasized that such things are not of the essence of poverty. Nor would it be justifiable to present *dependence* as a useful opportunity for mortification. The practice of mortification and the virtue of poverty are by no means one and the same thing.

It will be clear from what has been said above that the role of those who hold responsibility in secular Institutes cannot be that of a superior in a religious order. What will it be, then? There can be plenty of room for variation, but the office must always conform to the distinctly secular character of the vocation.

The consecrated lay person in an Institute without a common life or work must take charge of the organization of his own life. He is, however, bound to seek out the will of God as made known through the demands of his state and to do this in co-operation with the one responsible, whose task is not to give orders or impose a single point of view but to help him in a fraternal way to discover that will.

This general principle governs the question of secular poverty.

As a consecrated lay person I should, then, cheerfully grant to the person in charge a certain control over my life, within reasonable limits, and I should provide sufficient information about income, wage increase and expenses (without going into needless detail), not in order to seek permissions but so that he should be fully informed about my living conditions and needs. If this were done we would be able to discuss matters regularly as often as necessary, to find out better ways of practising that evangelical poverty demanded of any christian. This will involve such questions as: how to preserve interior detachment from possessions if I am doing well; how to put up with hardships; which unnecessary expenses to give up; how much to give to the poor; what actions to undertake to combat

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<sup>5</sup> An account of these rules is given in a canonical study by Marcel Wijnants, *La structure juridique des conseils évangéliques dans les instituts séculiers* (Bilzen 1967), pp 42-55.

injustice and poverty; and how best to put myself at others' disposal, giving freely of my time and talents?

In such a discussion the last word would normally belong to me, as an ordinary member of the Institute. It is not my president's role to substitute his decision for mine: the secular nature of our life is opposed to this. Rather than fighting shy of a true dialogue, I should make a positive contribution by questions, accepting criticism of my own viewpoint. If the constitutions stipulate written accounts, I should try to regard these as useful aids towards a more genuine poverty of life and not rest content with merely getting the books to balance.

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