

# TOWARDS A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE SECULAR INSTITUTES

## THE QUESTION OF SECULAR OBEDIENCE

By GUSTAVE MARTELET

THE FOLLOWING pages are not concerned with systematic theology: the subject does not allow of such treatment. The secular Institutes still pose many unanswered questions. However, since the Council declared that 'although secular Institutes are not religious Institutes, the profession they make in the world of the evangelical counsels . . . is authentic and complete',<sup>1</sup> a new way has been opened for experience and reflection. The principal need is both to live and reflect upon an evangelical consecration which is not 'religious' in the accepted canonical sense of the word. It must be possible to consecrate oneself to Christ *evangelically* in a way which is totally *secular*, one which completely respects the daily fabric of human life. Many practical problems arise from such a project, but none is harder to define than that of obedience.

Obedience would appear to be the corner stone of the traditional structure of religious life. But how in fact can it be discussed in the context of secular Institutes without their being brought *ipso facto* under the tutelage of religious life? This is the problem we have now to tackle, and the first step must be to rid ourselves of a current confusion concerning the nature of religious obedience. We are slow to recognize obedience as a simple evangelical rather than formally religious virtue. Our starting point will be the everyday life of lay-people, in which secular consecration operates. By this approach we hope to be able to show that there exists an obedience which is truly 'secular' and which, though at first sight rather confusing, is ultimately profoundly liberating.

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<sup>1</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 11.

We will therefore divide this study into three sections:

- i) an analysis of the ordinary obligations of life, on which christian holiness thrives;
- ii) the inherence of this evangelical obedience in the mystery of the Church;
- iii) an examination of the way in which it burgeons into a type of obedience suited to the secular Institutes.<sup>2</sup>

#### THE ORDINARY OBLIGATIONS OF LIFE AND CHRISTIAN OBEDIENCE

By obligations (or, as Teilhard called them, 'passivities') we mean everything in life which is not the result of our own deliberate decision. These 'obligations' represent the 'inescapable' character of our condition. If we consent to live at all, we *cannot* escape them. And the quality of our lives depends to a considerable extent on the way we assimilate them or adjust to them. In secular consecration, as indeed in any christian way of life worthy of the name, the inescapable is generously accepted; for in the things we cannot evade we can discern God's invitation to us to acknowledge our dependence on him. Analysis of the obligations from which secular consecration draws nourishment involves an understanding of and feeling for the texture of the human condition.

#### *Economic Constraints*

Man must work in order to keep alive. This basic obligation, which most men have to fulfil in conditions of great hardship, is also a fundamental duty; the fact of human freedom makes a physical constraint into a moral obligation. It need not worry us too much that a few people exist without apparently doing any work. The point is that all who are capable of doing so have a duty to collaborate in the work of the community. To be a parasite is not permissible. To work in order to live means entering into a realm of rights and duties, which are directed immediately to earning money and ultimately to obtaining the goods necessary for life. At the same time,

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<sup>2</sup> We shall use 'secular Institute' and 'secular Fraternity' as synonymous terms. The word secular indicates the ordinary character of the life of lay-people, as well as the special character of these Institutes which have as their precise object the sanctification, by means of the profession of the evangelical counsels, of secularity of life. (*We have preferred 'worldly' for secular, and 'worldliness' for secularity, although these words are unfortunately used habitually in the pejorative sense. Ed.*).

if one earns one's living by working, it is because the work is in some way useful, and because the service thus rendered to society receives social recognition. Work or wage-earning is therefore inseparable from work as *social service*, in the widest possible sense of that term; so that one must be careful to relate this aspect of work with what is fundamental to the spiritual meaning of any and every state of life. So it is that secular obedience to general economic constraints presupposes a respect and love for that humble and noble structure of one's state of life, in which physical necessity and the desire to serve others interpenetrate and are necessarily in harmony.

In any case, this human condition is not, in christian terms, a neutral situation: rather it provides the framework for a true incorporation into the mystery of Christ and the realm of God's will. Christ himself was a man who lived in close relationship to his fellowmen, a relationship narrowly defined by the economic and social structure of village life. He was involved in earning money, in exchanging services, in meeting needs, in respecting rights and duties. He was the son of a carpenter and himself a carpenter.<sup>3</sup> For him, then, the human condition was the same as for us. The first limitation imposed by one's state of life, the need to earn a living, which is also a form of service, is therefore objectively a sacramental situation, since this profoundly human condition is conformed to the will of God and permeated by the personal presence of his Son.

### *Family Obligations*

It is not in fact possible for any adult, whether married or celibate, to be genuinely obedient to the real constraints of life without first achieving a mature freedom from his or her parents. To be more precise, this liberation is the initial form which obedience to these real obligations of adult life must take. The idea that any unmarried person may, and indeed must, like married people, achieve an independent personal life, is not self-evident to many parents, nor indeed to some unmarried people themselves. The terms 'bachelor' and 'spinster' often designate those whom marriage has not freed from parental control. The spinster, for example, will, unless she is careful, be marked out for all the additional tasks her relatives can find for her.

It is true that unmarried people do bear a heavy responsibility for their parents and family. An unmarried son or daughter is, after

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<sup>3</sup> Cf Mk 6, 3.

all, more free than the married to help aged parents in distress. There are, therefore, certain family obligations which may not be evaded under the pretext of secular consecration. But to be sure that such obligations are really genuine, really grounded in a human situation and in harmony with the will of God, calls for the gifts of clear thinking and discernment. These in turn will require complete freedom from the attitudes of dependence proper to children, but which have nothing to do with human maturity and christian freedom. Thus the unmarried person should try to acquire as soon as possible a genuine freedom with regard to lodging, use of time, friends, leisure activities, comings and goings. Without standing on principle, but with a quiet resolution and as much tact and discretion as possible, the unmarried person must bring his family to accept the way in which his own personal liberty expresses itself.

Here too, the human life of our Lord provides an incomparable example. We can think in the first place of the symbolic rupture between Jesus and his parents in the Temple, in order that he might be about his Father's business. This behaviour so distressed them that his explanation, the word he spoke to them,<sup>4</sup> was more than they could understand. ('They': Mary, that is, as well as Joseph.) The public life of Jesus contains another clear trace of his attitude: 'Who is my mother and who are my brethren?', he asks, when he is told that his family are looking for him.<sup>5</sup> This answer, astonishing in its frankness, shows, at the very least, that Jesus felt himself obliged, as a condition of remaining truly himself, to go beyond a simple blood-relationship with his kin. To follow him is to live, therefore, in obedience to God and not to some family destiny in which we may have been caught through lack of human freedom or true fidelity to God.

### *Social Limitations*

By the word 'social' we refer not to the particular forms which relationships within society take (they have changed greatly, of course, within the last forty years), but rather to the *quality* that these relationships ought to possess. By social we mean what belongs to a systematic and practical 'humanizing' of personal relationships in professional and other work, rather than the relationships themselves. The word connotes a truth which must be made to permeate the relationships created by any professional work, since these in

<sup>4</sup> Lk 2, 50.

<sup>5</sup> Mt. 12, 42

themselves can lead to injustice and the depreciation of persons.

True social concern finds its expression in an effortless, almost unconscious reaction against the many and varied forms of dehumanization which can affect the personal relationships inherent in the different professional activities of the members of the secular fraternity. It coincides with a certain desire – at once spontaneous and rooted in mature reflection – to improve as far as possible what we may call the ‘relational fabric’, which is the very stuff of any working life. In point of fact, these professional constraints are too often interpreted and lived out in a purely mercenary spirit, or in terms of an individual or collective pragmatism which is profoundly dehumanizing. Graciousness, amiability, being at ease in one’s professional relationships are merely means to a better return on one’s capital or to greater economic efficiency. Behaviour patterns imposed by professions or so-called ‘services’ become stereotyped, without substance or life; so that men and women are turned into social robots. In this depersonalization of human relationships which threatens our hyper-socialized civilization, there lies an evil just as great as in the traditional social injustices (though the latter are only too real, and still require vigilant Christians willing to struggle against them).

Coming to grips with this evil is not primarily a matter of technique but of respect for persons and a love for what is human. It is a question of obeying a spiritual intuition which outstrips the techniques for improving group-behaviour patterns, and dedicates whoever possesses it to the search for an integral humanization of human relationships, even as professional work complicates or nullifies them. Social concern is, then, certainly a concern for justice; but it is a kind of care which must be deepened and enlarged, so as to include the duty of making the otherwise oppressive network of human inter-dependences which go to the making of even the simplest human life truly worth living. It demands a stubborn and continually inventive respect for the legitimate rights of others, which will ensure that no-one will ever live in sub-human conditions or fill a role which is sub-human, through my fault or through any structure for which I am responsible.

#### *Civic and Political Limitations*

Another form of relationship with others is the civic. This usually concerns the non-professional sector of living; for no matter what people do for a living, they are part of a city, commune or other

municipal unit. As such, they benefit from certain services: roads, public transport, postal services, urban or environmental improvements. Our daily lives receive an added enrichment which belongs to no-one in particular and is at the disposition of everyone.

We enter the realm of civic constraint by realizing the advantages enjoyed and the duties attendant on belonging to a district, town or other given human grouping. Out of this understanding of the humble restrictions of one's immediate environment and station in life, there is born a true sense of the universal interests which make a person fully human. It is in no sense a scaled-down version of patriotism; it demands much more than an emotional response. Obedience to civic constraints is one of the most modest and most neglected aspects of our modern life. It is what made Bethlehem the birthplace of Christ and through which he is for all time called Jesus of Nazareth.

In addition, this sense of locality, if it is properly understood, opens our hearts to the daily love of humble people – all those little people who make the world go round: employees of all kinds, conductors, mechanics, bus-drivers, traffic police, and many others who work and watch by night. Organized town-life, thanks to which the inhabitants find what they want in station or street or in their own homes, depends on the daily devotion of thousands and thousands of humble people. To understand this fully is to enter into a true love of other persons in whatever role they play, and to find a 'neighbour' in a truly evangelical way. Hearing the mystery of God while listening to the heartbeat of reality, the discovery of man in the fabric of the world, brings about that perfect realism on which secular consecration must first and foremost be nourished. While he was in the world, Christ himself was a faithful neighbour to even the humblest of people.

On a wider but less intimate scale, *Gaudium et Spes* recalls the unparalleled importance of politics, national and international, in the life of every man, and therefore of every christian.<sup>6</sup>

### *The Limitations of Health and Events*

The constraint most neglected by the healthy and dreaded by the sick is that of the body and its health. Modern life, especially among

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<sup>6</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 73–77. See also 27 and 29 for some examples.

those who are removed by their vocation from the domestic constraints of a home, very often gives rise to an easy-going attitude – if not actual anarchy – in the regulation of sleep and meals: to say nothing of actual diet or peculiar habits of eating. The bachelor's indifference to the clean and tidy, and a disdain for the kitchen among unmarried women, who claim to be worked off their feet and are really just negligent, both stem from the same basic attitude. Anyone who lives alone must be able to invite someone else to his table regularly: the 'table', then, must always be there. This is another obligation of secular life.

We must also take seriously the obligations or 'passivities' of relaxation and rest. No-one can ask his mind and body for 'unconditional efforts'. Sleep in particular is an inescapable obligation, and authentic service in local life, work and trade is always finally conditioned by it. Nerves cannot be calm, the mind cannot be clear, the body cannot be strong, without adequate sleep.

In our submission to such constraints, we discover the lowliness of human nature and of temperament; we recognize that we cannot do everything, that we have limits. Certainly we must push the limits back as far as possible and not admit defeat too soon. But work which one voluntarily pushes to the point where it has the power to destroy us physically is not, except for the occasional charismatic exception, a work of submission. It is an expression of power-hunger or escapism, incompatible with a secular obedience to the individual obligations of life.

The everyday form of collective universal obligations is obviously routine events. Here, too, matters are astonishingly simple and concrete. There are some folk who make a point of honour, so to speak, of being sad when the sun does not shine. There is a kind of simplicity in submitting oneself to the most general conditions of life, which means that despite the variations of weather or season we are never disappointed or 'frustrated'. One is always therefore fundamentally free and happy and determined, no matter what the weather, to seek the happiness of others and thus to find one's own.

More difficult to adapt to are local or world political events which are the source of deep and disturbing apprehension. We all know people who are profoundly troubled by news which they feel, rightly or wrongly, to be an immediate or long-term threat to their own security. They tremble for the world, it is true, but first and foremost they tremble for themselves. They have not accepted, or at least they do not see that they ought to accept, the fact that the

general insecurity of the world must weigh on their own lives. Many a case of panic, simple fear, or lack of liberty among adults in a world of widely diffused information is explained by quite other sentiments than love. It is for oneself that one is afraid; and unless one is careful, this instinctive defensive reaction may become the source of judgements or behaviour which do no credit to the human being or the christian in us. Ask yourself, for example, whether or not you would agree with an atomic war against China, and you will see what I mean.

That is why, without making a romantic issue of it and without wishing to play the homespun hero, it must be said that to be docile and to maintain our freedom in relation to the political events on which the peace of the world and our own security depend presupposes that we have somehow or other accepted the eventuality of death, at least for ourselves, if not for others. Then fear, either animal or human, before the various potential kinds of violence in the world, will no longer be the uncontrolled motivation of our ideas and judgements in political matters, whether as a class or as a race. Really to allow ourselves to be called by God through the great collective happenings in the world, we must first stop wishing to 'defend ourselves', and to this end progressively empty ourselves of the worship of our acquired securities, however justified they may be. True liberty in the world thrives on the possibility of stripping oneself of everything. In fact, until we have accepted for ourselves and our comforts the possibility of a drop in standards, we cannot reach an objective judgment on the extremely grave problems which beset our world: whether it be the Church of silence, China, the war in Vietnam, the third world in general and latin America in particular, the negroes in the United States or South Africa, european communism, Israel or race relations in Britain. Here, seeing is always synonymous with acting, and therefore with being free. Acceptance of death is also true liberty. This acceptance is by no means a matter of imagination or feeling: only a matter of prayer. It is a deep, silent and constant handing back of oneself to God, who reigns in his own way over all the obligations in the world. We must know how to reach him through them, since of ourselves we can do nothing in the order of effectiveness or justice to free ourselves of them, or, more importantly, to free other people. World events, in the sense that they are so agonizing in terms of this world's peace, require of us that we should die to ourselves in our relationships with others.



*Obedience in this world: a spiritual sacrifice*

Obedience to God by meeting these obligations leads us to the 'spiritual sacrifice' of ourselves in the most ordinary conditions of life in the world:

Think of God's mercy, my brothers, and worship him, I beg you, in a way that is worthy of thinking beings, by offering your living bodies as a holy sacrifice truly pleasing to God. Do not model yourselves on the behaviour of the world around you, but let your behaviour change, modelled by your new minds. This is the only way to discover the will of God and know what is good, what it is that God wants, what is the perfect thing to do.<sup>7</sup>

The life of the christian in the world is thus the same as the life of any other man, but it is lived by a spiritual discernment of ways of self-giving which lie hidden within the ordinary life familiar to us all. The result of this fully secular obedience is that it opens up in daily life a way of evangelical availability, realism and gentleness. The daily practice of this obedience teaches us to welcome life as it is without tension, as an assured mediator of the presence of God and of others who claim our love. This obedience is therefore a path to the fraternity, devotion and peace of Christ's kingdom. It commends us to 'every human being with a conscience' according to the wish of St Paul concerning his own ministry.<sup>8</sup> Far from snatching from us what is valuable in human existence, it shows us how to be increasingly faithful to the living content of the world. From this it leads finally to a configuration with Christ himself, insofar as he 'became as men are, and being as all men are, was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a Cross'.<sup>9</sup> His condition as Son of his Father is our human condition, and it is precisely here that he displays to us the full truth of Sonship: 'Even in this world we are become as he is'.<sup>10</sup>

SECULAR OBEDIENCE AND THE MYSTERY  
OF THE CHURCH

Still and all, this obedience to God present through Christ in the heart of the world is nothing more than an entrance into the spiritual

<sup>7</sup> Rom 12, 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> Phil 2, 7-8.

<sup>8</sup> 2 Cor 4, 2.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Jn 4, 17.

mystery of the Church herself.<sup>11</sup> Obedience to the ordinary obligations of life, which is essential to consecrated worldliness,<sup>12</sup> is also necessary to the Church herself. She is never free of the obligation to seek in the most commonplace conditions of history the Christ whom she must give to the world. Every exploration, every discovery of Christ in the obligations of the world, is a sharing in the exploration and discovery which the Church is given grace to pursue and fulfil until the end of time. In spite of all her weaknesses, the Church is assisted by the Spirit, so that in one way or another, institutional or charismatic, collective or individual, overt or hidden, she may remain faithful to the love of Christ in the daily structures of life in the world.

Consecrated worldliness, then, is not attempting anything new in being true to its own charism. It is simply shedding greater light on a certain type of spiritual behaviour which has always defined the very being of the Church, against the background of contemporary behaviour. That is why consecrated worldliness is not imposed on the Church from outside. It has always been there, a presence without clear features or a precise name, but lived in a thousand different ways by men and women who have sought nothing else in the world except the language of a God who himself speaks to us through the most urgent reality of men and of life. Consecrated worldliness merely institutionalizes, in the least stringent way, what has always been a living force in the Church. Its perfect example is the Virgin Mary, as she is always the perfect example of everything that is most spiritual and self-effacing in the work of God in Jesus Christ.

Since, therefore, secular consecration is the charismatic reflection of an essential aspect of the Church's life in this world, what its existence means first of all is the mirroring of the Church herself. Even if secular consecration had never dreamt of becoming a 'type' of the Church, a spiritual response to the secular interventions of the Lord with which the course of history is filled, it would never be able to do without an absolute ecclesial fidelity. That is why *obedience to*

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<sup>11</sup> Cf *Lumen Gentium*, 47; *Gaudium et Spes*, 40-44. <sup>12</sup> It will be noticed that we use here the term consecrated worldliness (*sécularité consacrée*) rather than secular or worldly consecration (*consécration séculière*). At bottom the two are identical; but we prefer the first in order to show that consecration in a secular Institute is simply a way of embracing the worldly condition. It does not constitute a kind of life distinct from the world, as does religious consecration (in spite of all that may be argued to the contrary). Rather it is present to the world without modifying any of its structures - for example by the presence of a visible community.

*the Church*, in the most vital, spontaneous and liberating sense that spiritual love can give to these words, is the very soul of a charism which finds revealed in the Church its exemplary and all-embracing realization. So too, consecrated worldliness does not primarily receive a set of juridical rules from the Church, but a living model. The same holds for every true christian, who in fact learns nothing else from the Church except the duty of loving and following Christ. But this general truth takes on a particular aspect in the case of consecrated worldliness, which in a special way dedicates itself to the imitation of ecclesial worldliness.

Just as married couples imitate the Church above all in their conjugal fidelity, consecrated worldliness, for its part, imitates the docility of the Church in face of the worldly circumstances conditioning the love which is humanized by God. Its desire is to be in the world like Mary at Cana. It seeks God and his glory side by side with the day-to-day cares of this world, among the water-pots and the jugs, the yeast and the kneading-trough, in the obscurely impoverished sectors of life where people suffer, struggle, and hang on. Consecrated worldliness hears the same command from the Church that Mary gave to the servants at the wedding: 'Do whatever he tells you to do'.<sup>13</sup> This word is enough to illuminate the Church as well. For what Christ did at Cana, he continues to declare in today's world. He reassumes the most ordinary stuff of this world. He gives significance to perfectly ordinary gestures: carrying, filling, emptying, serving. He leads us to discover fresh meaning in human existence as the object of his love and intimate care. No doubt at Cana he performed a miracle, transforming water into wine. But this miracle is not only a matter of history, it is an extremely far-reaching symbol. For the Christ that the Church bids us hear and follow, the Christ to whom consecrated worldliness, educated by the Church, understands itself to be devoted, is the Christ who gave grandeur to the banal and flavour to the insipid. He is the one who reveals God as the faithful guarantor of the human, not as its destroyer or its rival. Through him, the human takes on all its meaning without being closed in on itself.

The Church, inserted in the world, follows in the footsteps of Christ, though often lagging far behind him, taking the same upward path. She too seeks the sanctification of all that is human, a process which the Lord began and which continues, under his aegis, by the

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<sup>13</sup> Jn 2, 5.

grace of the Holy Spirit. But as the Church herself is fallible in human matters, she makes mistakes, and repairs are necessary. She has had to pick herself up and start again many times, so as not to travesty the gospel in her secular dealings with the poorest of every class, continent and culture. Success is never assured in advance. Renewal and adaptation is a permanent necessity for the Church's work and life; so is humility. But perhaps here above all, even in her weaknesses, she remains an example; for even when she is staggering beneath the weight of her own injustices, she still retains enough strength and enough conscience to refer her children back to the One they should have listened to in the first place. Further, she gains a new lease of life whenever, in her Councils, she restates what is a constant: 'Do whatever he tells you'. This is a phrase which she must go on repeating if she is to go on existing.

#### OBEDIENCE PROPERLY SO-CALLED IN A SECULAR FRATERNITY

What is asked of a secular fraternity, with its specific charism, is a spirituality capable of leading people to true consecrated worldliness. Spiritual docility to human reality, the charism of finding God where he really is, though at first sight he seems utterly absent, the taste and feeling for the permanent and everyday consequences of the incarnation: all these are a gift and a grace still in germ. They need to be cultivated, to gain strength and to become more and more explicit. Meanwhile the fraternity is a sign that the underlying charism is not simply an individual idea, subjective, preposterous or eccentric. It signifies on the contrary an inspiration recognized in the Church, and one from which life can be drawn. No doubt it is essential to this inspiration to be lived in isolation, not in community. But this isolation is not spiritual individualism or eremiticism. Immersed as they are in the day-to-day tasks of their profession or surroundings, the members of a secular fraternity are never isolated in the sociological sense of the word. One is never in fact isolated in a world containing one's place of birth, work and residence, not to mention the complex of relationships with one's surroundings. The comparison is with the conjugal or religious community which are excluded by secular consecration. One means also that every member preserves his temporal and sociological autonomy, as far as the rest of the Institute is concerned. Nevertheless, isolation understood in this way not only does not exclude a real convergence of inspiration, but even presupposes it. The greater the sociological indepen-

dence of each member, the more profound can be that inward convergence of spirit among people whom life holds apart and a common inspiration draws together.

Certainly this community of inspiration finds its corporate and objective expression within the Church, which gives precise shape to secular fraternities canonically approved and spiritually sustained. By acknowledging, and indeed willing, the existence of the secular fraternities within her fold, the Church includes them in her own social structure, and this structure is objective, though in a way proper to the Church. This does not mean, however, that she wishes to impose them as distinct social entities on the world, especially as their members desire, as is their right, to be present in the world anonymously and without departing from the common pattern of christian life. In short, this new 'grouping', recognized in the Church, is a spiritual one, dependent on inspiration. It does not require any particular sociological role in the world as do religious communities and congregations. It is evident, then, to what extent fraternities may and must be distinguished from institutions properly so-called (at least if one means by this term the visible, juridical form in which every sociologically recognized group is embodied in the human community: the Trade Union, the academic body, the corporation or even the religious community). It is precisely this juridical status that every secular fraternity aims to do without, since they set themselves no empirically definable objectives, and are dedicated solely to fostering the interior lives of their members.

As an example of the purely spiritual relationship set up in a secular fraternity, one can cite the letters of St Francis Xavier to the first jesuits. It is hardly possible to imagine closer ties of brotherhood than those by which he remained united with his companions left behind in Europe. Set down in the worst conditions that distance can create – mail could take three years and more to arrive – Francis Xavier remained one in body and soul with his brothers in Europe, and especially with St Ignatius. One might almost say that this type of communication, which transcends distances without suppressing them, is characteristic of a secular fraternity. The exterior plays the least possible part. What is essential is a unity of spirit in regard to a common purpose coupled with a complete flexibility in the means legitimately employed to achieve this.

The inherent structure that brings consecrated secular lives into convergence with one another is of the spiritual order. Their brotherhood is not to be understood primarily in terms of sociology, or

psychology: exchange does not take place directly on the level of practical applications, since these by their very nature are diverse and even mutually exclusive, but on the level of a fundamental inspiration. The letters of Francis Xavier to Ignatius insist not so much on the methods he adopts, as on his intentions and the whole spiritual tone of his life and activity. Here lies the whole point of this correspondence. It is in the light of the original insight, which through contact with Ignatius and under his instruction made him a jesuit, that Xavier works out in detail the forms that his own service of the Church, Christ and souls must take. The result is deep-seated harmony of intention in a wide variety of situations, and it is just this that a secular fraternity needs. Even more than Francis Xavier, the members of such a fraternity must possess that complete spiritual liberty which binds together the hearts it has set free.

In a secular fraternity, permanent dependence on a common inspiration necessarily goes hand in hand with a total freedom of decision. The fraternity provides a support for its members in the intimate realm of personal freedom, a support which is all the more effective for the avoidance of all that touches the visible sector of life, where normal community finds expression. If lived to its furthest limits, secular consecration would leave no sociologically discernible trace of its activity in a human life. Just as one ought to be able to say of any religious that his whole life and personality bears the distinctive spiritual stamp of his order, so one should *not* be able to distinguish any specific sign in a member of a secular fraternity, whose existence is totally integrated into a profession and into life in general, and into the purely temporal service of the world.

Prayer, reflection, revival of the spirit by drawing on the original inspiration of a common charism, must take pride of place in the periodical reunions of the fraternity. It is through the members' free and frank effect upon each other that a certain discernment becomes operative, and a kind of spontaneous self-correction takes place. In the light of such exchanges – which can be all the more effective for being unstructured – each member is helped to discover the ways in which he normally respects or evades the inspiration or charism. The fraternity thus serves to reveal and correct. Each one recognizes that the inspiration which guides, or ought to guide, his life is not reducible to his own ideas; it is discerned through what is said and seen by the others. This only holds true, however, on two conditions, which have to do with the statutes of the Institute

and with those who hold authority in it.

A secular fraternity cannot exist without statutes. In these, its inspiration is literally given shape, a definite structure which constitutes the indefectible norm of those liberties that spring from the promise or vow of each member to make that inspiration his own. The fraternity governed by an inspiration which can be objectively recognized is therefore more than the sum of all its members, since no single individual could claim to be the autonomous source of the spirit which gives it unity. Indeed, if each member's exercise of personal freedom is not to cause the fraternity as a whole to disintegrate, the autonomy of choice that each one possesses as a person in the world must be rooted in a total personal submission to the inspiration of all the members. This is why the fraternity must acknowledge an expression of this inspiration which is at once living and statutory, and which does not bend to the wishes of individuals but transforms them. I belong to a fraternity in so far as I accept that the inspiration which is its binding force is also the inspiration by which I am judged.

As the living guardian of the charism objectivized in the constitutions, the fraternity legitimately shapes and moulds my conscience. Reference to the ends I claim to follow in dependence on the fraternity makes possible a genuine self-assessment. That is why secular obedience can be said to be first and foremost an obedience to the spirit which inspires and defines that fraternity. Further, it can be defined as essentially *fraternal*, since the inspiration is committed in quite a special way to a fraternity whose juridical requirements are minimal. Finally, we may even call secular obedience an obedience of *inspiration* and not of jurisdiction in the strict sense. It is of course true that there is an element of jurisdiction in the obedience of consecrated worldliness, since each member agrees to be judged, corrected and educated by the fraternity. Nevertheless this remains a *jurisdiction of inspiration*, which affects its subjects only by freedom, never by directing their actions.

This approach sheds light on the role of the group-leader (*responsible*). In fact, the inspiration which raises human freedom in the world to the level of consecration is no mere natural inspiration, but one which emanates directly from the Church itself. It is a sort of charismatic reflection of the Church contained in the very heart of the secular fraternities. This inspiration, then, belongs primarily to the fraternity which possesses it and draws life from it. It is truly a gift *received*. It cannot be bent to every wind of doctrine or tempe-

rament, and must shape the lives of those men and women who choose to surrender to it. That is why a secular fraternity cannot be regarded as one more human group. On the contrary, it is a church in miniature, and this is not only because of the secular embodiment of the mystery which gives it life but also through the fact that the value at the heart of its life is a gift.

Born of a free inspiration and energized by a charism, a secular Institute will grow in strength only when it recognizes the spiritual gift which gave it birth and which constitutes its inmost nature. Its strength lies in its humility. In a secular fraternity, therefore, there is an essential and transcendent element which enables it to exist as an organic cell of the Church. The Institute that claims to depend solely on the decision of its members would lack this element. Its secularity would become that of any grouping of individuals. Because it lives primarily on a gift it has received, the secular fraternity recognizes in its charism the very source of its own existence. The constitutions and rule mark out and express the import of this gift for the fraternity, which accepts it and strives to live by it. But the fraternity in its turn cannot really play its part except on the spiritual basis of submission and receptivity, in other words by placing itself under the liberating but inalienable sign of a living authority.

Firstly, then, the group-leader stands as a sign for the whole group. Though he should and probably will be self-effacing, the very existence of one who has been chosen and accepted as leader is, within the fraternity, tantamount to an explicit recognition of his distinctive role in the spirit. Just as the constitutions stand for the statutory aspect of a charism over which no individual member has control, so the leader stands for the fact that the fraternity does not submit, *a priori*, to any influence, however compelling and attractive, except the influence of the spirit conforming to its charism. It is his function, not his temperament or his natural gifts, which makes the leader the fraternity's own *guarantee of its inalienable spiritual identity*. A written text on its own could not suffice: it could always be compromised or forgotten. Since no-one wants a fraternity which would abolish the charismatic norm on which it rests, it is the leader's mission to be the appointed witness to the various ways in which the community is objectively faithful to its charism, and sometimes to initiate these. And because his function is to protect the fraternity from occasional weaknesses, he is a direct expression of the will of the fraternity. There is no special mystery about the appointment of a leader elected by a simple fraternal vote; and yet his existence



signifies, in a particular though not exclusive fashion, the mystery of God in the fraternity.

However, a minimum of spiritual organization within a fraternity will always be necessary. The leader will, in the last resort, be obliged to assess the obvious or hidden ways in which an individual member is out of tune with the inspiration. Although he has no dominative power over persons, it is his specific right and duty to watch over the spiritual well-being of the fraternity, work for its progress and assure its continuity by appropriate spiritual means. His fraternal interventions will never be 'authoritarian' except in extreme cases: for example, when it becomes evident that there is no other way of overcoming a serious crisis. And they should always be strictly confirmed within the limits of the constitutions. The normal regime of the fraternity will be the fulfilment of reciprocal obligations, not the assertion of juridical rights. Restrained, exact, moderate, purely functional juridical rights, whose purpose is service, never power or prestige, do exist; yet the juridical is so coloured by the fraternal that these rights seem to find their true role in never being invoked.

Is it all now clear? The obedience of worldly consecration is a true obedience, but it is only genuine worldly obedience as long as it is inspirational and fraternal. This means, first of all, that no-one may consider himself sole judge and sole measure of the charism which defines the fraternity: rather, it is accepted that the fraternity, and within it the leader, alone has the power to judge each one's conformity to the common charism. Each one also accepts that the fraternity, and within it the leader, thus becomes his norm of conscience with regard to the fidelity promised to the inspiration. It seems to me that this is the whole meaning of the vow of obedience within the secular fraternity. Since in effect it is the fraternity which possesses the inspiration, fidelity to it will involve living out one's own personal response to that inspiration in a way that is recognizable to the whole fraternity. And since into the bargain, the leader is the functional sign of the fraternity's spiritual foundation in a gift of the Lord, everyone recognizes the leader's right to keep an eye out for him, and therefore to make judgements concerning his objective conformity to the inspiration. The constitutions set limits to these rights and clarify them. The leader in the fraternity is therefore the one who has received, and to whom each member has freely granted, the duty and the right of helping every individual member of the fraternity, and thus the fraternity as a whole, to become and to remain objectively faithful to the common inspiration. A leader could

never substitute himself even in the slightest degree for this inspiration. Like everyone else, his task is to respond to it; but he does so under a special title accepted by the fraternity and approved as such by the hierarchical Church. In any case, it is the inspiration which would appear to be, throughout, the principle, the standard and the end of every element of truly fraternal obedience in consecrated worldliness. For this has no other aim than to teach the members to live the love of Christ in their love for the world.

**REVOLUTION IN RELIGIOUS LIFE.** The five years that have elapsed since the promulgation of the decree *Perfectae Caritatis* have witnessed not so much an 'updating' as a revolution, particularly in those Institutes in which 'apostolic and charitable activity is of the essence of religious life'. The revolution can hardly be called bloodless: some of these Institutes are already facing extinction, whilst others have been so decimated that they can no longer carry on, with anything like the same enthusiasm and efficiency, the apostolic works (for the most part heavily institutional) which had become traditional to them.

Externally, this revolution is manifesting itself in a substantially different style of life, certain aspects of which are obviously inimical to the institutional type of apostolate. Some feel that new apostolic approaches are being adopted largely because they are favourable to the changed and still changing life-style; or they see them simply as a Hobson's choice, in the face of decreasing vocations and multiplying defections. All need to see and be convinced that change must be dictated (within the bounds of human limitation) solely by total commitment to Christ in evangelical terms and by the needs of the Church in her mission to the world of today. If these are in fact the principles enlivening the present changes, then there will be true apostolic renewal, one which could never militate against the charism and sound traditions of any Institutes (cf *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2).

In our Supplement on CONTEMPORARY APOSTOLATE AND CONSECRATED LIFE, various experts will expound and illustrate these principles (see p 80).