

SECULAR INSTITUTES FOR PRIESTS

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THE SECOND Vatican Council places great emphasis on the connection between the ministry of a priest and the conduct of his personal life, between apostolic activity and personal sanctity:

This most holy synod, in order to achieve its pastoral goals of renewal within the Church, of the spread of the gospel throughout the world and of dialogue with the modern world, fervently exhorts all priests to use the appropriate means endorsed by the Church in their constant striving for that greater sanctity which will make them increasingly useful instruments in the service of all of God's people.¹

The Secular Institute can be included among those 'means' commended by the Church which aim at a harmonious combination of ministerial activity and personal perfection, as a contribution to the contemporary search for a genuine spirituality for the secular priest. Today there are about fifteen secular Institutes for priests, for the most part spread over several countries. At the present time only a small proportion of these has received ecclesiastical approval; only five are Institutes of pontifical right.

Recognition and commendation by Church authority

On 2 February 1947, Pius XII, in the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater*, which gave canonical recognition to secular Institutes, welcomed this form of life as also suitable for priests:

Associations of clergy, as well as laity, whose members bear witness to the evangelical counsels in the world so as to reach christian perfection and the full exercise of their apostolate, are clearly distinguished from other societies of the faithful, by being given the special name of 'Institutes' or 'Secular Institutes' and are to be regarded as subject to the norms of this Apostolic Constitution.²

¹ *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 12.

² Cf also the same Pontiff's *Motu Proprio Primo Feliciter* (12 March, 1948), art. 1.

Since 1947, Popes have drawn particular attention to the secular Institutes as a way of life approved by the Church for secular clergy. In his address to the participants at the first congress on the State of Perfection, Pius XII emphasized that 'there is no reason why clergy should not join secular Institutes in order to aim at evangelical perfection in this form of life'.³ John XXIII, in his encyclical *Sacerdotii nostri* (August 1st 1959), acknowledges that today many priests belonging to the diocesan clergy are receiving support and help from those associations confirmed by Church authority, so as to be able to pursue the way of perfection more easily and with less hindrance. In September 1962 the same Pope declared, in reply to the enquiry of a religious congregation, that he agreed to secular Institutes for diocesan priests.

The second Vatican Council, in commending those associations 'whose rules have been recognized by the competent church authority, and which foster priestly holiness in the exercise of the ministry through an apt and properly approved rule of life and through brotherly assistance',⁴ is clearly speaking of the secular Institutes for clergy. Further, the decree *Perfectae caritatis* makes express mention of these Institutes:

Although secular Institutes are not religious Institutes, the profession they make in the world of the evangelical counsels is officially recognized by the Church as authentic and complete. This profession confers a consecration on persons living in the world, men and women, laity and clergy. Their chief aim therefore must be to give themselves wholly to God in perfect charity. Their Institutes ought to preserve that secular character which is proper to their specific nature in order that they may carry out their apostolate efficaciously in the world, as it were from the world's midst, since it was for this reason that they were founded.⁵

The text distinguishes clearly two essential elements which characterize this way of life, and which therefore must also be realized in secular Institutes for clergy as well as for laity: dedication to God by the evangelical counsels, and apostolic involvement in the world.

Total devotion to God and man by the evangelical counsels.

Reception of the sacrament of holy Orders and membership of the clergy do not represent in themselves any commitment to the

³ 8 December 1950.

⁴ *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 8.

⁵ *Perfectae Caritatis*, 11.

evangelical counsels. But like everyone else in the Church, priests too are called to that sanctity 'which is manifested in a special way in the practice of the counsels, traditionally called evangelical'.⁶ Perhaps it can even be said that it is in fact ordination to the priesthood and priestly service which commit one to the life of growing conformity to the claims of the gospel and total dedication to God and man. Those priests who dedicate themselves to the observance of the evangelical counsels by entering a secular Institute see therein a possibility of achieving a greater fidelity to the ideals of christian perfection and their vocation as diocesan priests. The way in which members of clerical secular Institutes endeavour to live the evangelical counsels may be seen from the constitutions of one of them:

Poverty. Out of love of the Lord and the poor, in a spirit of dedication to the Father and witness to the demands of the gospel, priests of the Union dedicate themselves to live in poverty. Through their dedication they enter into a permanent state of renunciation of all their possessions.

The form of their poverty is that of a diocesan priest who is concerned for a truly effective apostolate. They choose the poorest standard of living which is possible for them, taking into proper account their role as clergy, the nature of their pastoral service and that discretion which obliges them to charitable consideration for the clergy in their diocese.

Members of the Union shall store up no treasure for the future. However, in obedience to their Bishop, they are obliged to follow diocesan regulations about mutual help for the clergy, medical and other insurances.

Chastity. Through the consecration of their chastity, priests of the Union bear witness before Jesus to their resolution to love him with undivided attention. This absolute dedication enables them to cooperate more completely in the work of the salvation of the world and to love all men with a completely free heart.

Obedience. In their desire to enter with their whole being into the obedience of Jesus the Saviour, who was obedient to the total surrender of the cross, members of the Union commit themselves to obedience, according to the rules, in order to devote their life completely to God through the sacrifice of their own will.

Priests of the Union are, like all diocesan priests, called to serve the Church in dependence on their bishop. They make their vow of obedience a particular means to enter more completely into this

⁶ *Lumen Gentium*, 39.

spirit of child-like submission. The obedience which they owe to their superior in no way removes them from the jurisdiction of their bishop. Any possible conflict between obedience owed to the bishop and obedience owed to a local superior of the Union is to be resolved in favour of the former.

The 'worldly' character of the clerical secular Institutes.

Commitment to the evangelical counsels and membership of a secular Institute in no way alters the relationship of members to the diocese to which they belong. They continue to belong to the secular clergy and are externally in no way distinguishable from them. This canonical secularity does not, however, fully express that secular quality which is a peculiar characteristic of the secular Institute. An element needs to be added, described in papal documents and the second Vatican Council by the formula *in mundo ac veluti ex mundo*, which has been called 'apostolic worldliness'. This means that members do not alter any of the normal circumstances of their lives: their profession, their environment, the position in which they are placed. Within this same sphere of life, they make their own that mission of the Church which is to be a leaven of divine life and love amongst men. Members of secular Institutes attempt to fulfil this, their missionary task, not only in the world, but with the means of the world: through competence, technical knowledge, through friendship and friendliness, through the faithful performance of duty, in order in this way slowly and irresistibly to prepare the hearts of men for the working of saving grace. It is not difficult to imagine how this apostolic worldliness can be and is in fact realized by lay people. If, however, one tries to apply this secular form of the apostolate to priests, whose specifically priestly work is done publicly, and who, in virtue of their mission, are tied to the direct apostolate, difficulties would seem to arise. How is the concept of apostolic worldliness to be applied in their case?

To find an answer to this question it is necessary first to clarify the distinction made in the conciliar decree on the Priesthood concerning two areas in which priests can carry out their service of building up the mystical body of Christ:

All priests are sent forth as co-workers in the same undertaking, whether they are engaged in a parochial or a supra-parochial ministry, whether they devote their efforts to scientific research or teaching, whether by manual labour they share in the lot of the workers themselves, if there seems to be need for this and competent authority

approves it, or whether they fulfil any other apostolic tasks or labours related to the apostolate.⁷

This conciliar text recognizes that there exists, along side pastoral work in the broadest sense of the word, priestly work in a lay, civil, capacity – whether as ‘white-collar worker’, or as ‘manual worker’. There are clerical secular Institutes whose members follow a profession in which they have acquired a special competence which they continue to practise after their ordination to the priesthood. Such activity is reminiscent of the experiment of the worker priests in France. Besides, however, the religious obligation to the evangelical counsels, there is a further important difference between the member of a clerical secular Institute and the ‘worker-priest’. In France, priests were sent into the factories and became workers, without their being able to share there anything other than their grace of order; the secular Institutes on the other hand turn workmen into priests, and accept them into the family of the Institute without removing them from their place of work. Like the layman, the priest is here able to exercise a genuinely secular apostolate in its widest form. He attempts, through human contact and professional competence, to penetrate a milieu in which he would otherwise hardly be able to exercise any influence. Personal encounter, and the brotherly love which enables him to share in the life, the work, the sufferings and the longings of his fellows, creates a flexible and unstructured contact on a human and professional plane in an atmosphere of trust. This kind of presence in the world enables the contribution of the priestly office to be brought to bear in the human situation at the right moment. It thus enables the priest to stand in a more profoundly pastoral relationship alongside his fellow men. This is exactly what is meant by an apostolate in the world, a ‘worldly’ apostolate, and possibly also a future form of a more contemporary type of pastoral care altogether.

This extreme form of apostolic worldliness, which up to now has been the exception and is still very rare, is clearly not possible for those members of clerical secular Institutes who are engaged in full time pastoral work. For them, however, there is another way in which their apostolate in the world can be realized. Through their enrolment in the diocese they have not only become secular priests in the canonical sense, that is, non-religious, but they have at the

⁷ *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 8.

same time entered into a commitment with the diocese to which they dedicate their service. To give more emphasis to the apostolic side of a priest's work than is implied in the term 'secular priest', the Council preferred to speak of diocesan priests. Their *saecularitas apostolica* (apostolic worldliness) is rooted in their *diocesanitas* (membership of the diocese). The fact that apostolic worldliness is committed to secular Institutes means that those clergy working in the service of the diocese whilst belonging to these Institutes must permeate their activity as diocesan clergy with the evangelical counsels and mould the basic relationships of their service in the diocese in the spirit of absolute love of God and their neighbour. The way in which clerical secular Institutes attempt to realize this ideal can be seen in the rule of the Institute from which we have already cited:

The total life of the clergy of the Union, and not only their priestly activity, must become part of their apostolate.

Their love is revealed above all in the attempt to show understanding and friendship to every individual, regardless of his sphere of life, his education, his nationality or race, and by the consecration of self in humble and brotherly care for the poor and the despised. They are also concerned to practise the virtues of justice, candour and honesty. They show this love in the first instance towards the priests of their diocese whom they are to love as true friends. They show openness and brotherliness towards other groups and societies.

Their relations with the laity in their common task of the apostolate are characterized by a spirit of humble service.

They are responsive to the appeals of the holy Father and of their bishop and combine a humble fidelity to the task committed to them with a spirit of openness to the needs of the whole Church.

This text enumerates four basic areas in the life of a secular priest where members of clerical secular Institutes have to make apostolic worldliness a reality:

a) Fellowship with the bishop. As diocesan priests, members of a secular Institute work in fellowship and co-operation with the bishop who is the centre and head of the diocese.

Priests are called to serve the people of God as provident fellow-workers with the episcopal order, as its support and instrument. They constitute one priesthood with their bishop, although that priesthood is comprised of different functions.⁸

The relationships between the bishop and his diocesan priests should

⁸ *Lumen Gentium*, 28.

rest above all upon the bonds of supernatural charity, so that the harmony of the will of the priests with that of their bishop may make more fruitful their pastoral activity.⁹

They must therefore stand by their own bishop in sincere charity and obedience. This priestly obedience, animated by a spirit of co-operation, is based on the very sharing in the episcopal ministry, conferred on priests both through the sacrament of orders and the canonical mission.¹⁰

The members of secular Institutes endeavour as fully as possible to meet the actual demands made on every diocesan priest. The vow of obedience is particularly suited to prepare them for a more total commitment and constant availability. It is not necessary for the bishop to know exactly which members of his diocesan clergy belong to a secular Institute. Indeed, many bishops would prefer not to know the names of members: otherwise they may be tempted either to show them special preference or deliberately neglect them – which would be harmful to the unity of the presbyterate.

b) Links with diocesan priests. The search for perfect love to which the priests of secular Institutes have committed themselves at their dedication must show itself above all towards their colleagues, to whom they are bound in a deeply personal relationship by the sacrament of Order and the mission of the Church. This brotherhood 'should naturally and freely manifest itself in mutual aid, spiritual as well as material, pastoral as well as personal, in meetings and in a community of life, of labour, of charity'.¹¹ Membership of a secular Institute in no way withdraws clergy from their brethren in the presbyterium of the diocese. Obligations to 'activities' proper to their Institute are minimal. The members meet once a month in their own group, to pray together and to hold a renewal of their life. Every two years they take part in a joint retreat. They in no way constitute a regular community of common life and action, concerned only with themselves. This would in fact be an impediment to the apostolic worldliness of the secular Institutes. On these grounds the holy See recently refused recognition as a secular Institute to the *Mission SS. Pierre et Paul*, founded some time ago by the dominican Jacques Leow. Instead, the holy See recognized this community as a *societas apostolica*, although its members are active in the world in

⁹ *Christus Dominus*, 28.

¹⁰ *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 7.

¹¹ *Lumen Gentium*, 28.

middle class professions. The regularity of their common life separates them off so emphatically from the way of life of the rest of the diocesan priests that it cannot really be reconciled with true *diocesaneitas*. Members of secular Institutes seek no privileges in the presbyterium of the diocese, but endeavour in the power of the evangelical counsels to perfect their human and christian relationships with their colleagues and to put into practice the appropriate recommendations of the second Vatican Council.¹²

c) Co-operation with the laity. Members of the clerical secular Institutes also endeavour to imbue their relationships with the laity in the common task of apostolate in parish and diocese with the spirit of the gospel and to foster with them a true partnership in the pastoral work of the local church, as desired by the Council:

Priests must sincerely acknowledge and promote the dignity of the laity and the role which is proper to them in the mission of the Church. They should scrupulously honour that just freedom which is due to everyone in this earthly city. They should listen to the laity willingly, consider their wishes in a fraternal spirit, and recognize their experience and competence in the different areas of human activity, so that together with them they will be able to read the signs of the times . . . Priests should also confidently entrust to the laity duties in the service of the Church, allowing them freedom and room for action. In fact, on suitable occasions, they should invite them to undertake works on their own initiative.¹³

A partnership of this kind, which allows the laity genuine initiative and personal responsibility, is furthered in some secular Institutes by the fact that priests and laity are fellow-members, and encourage and enrich each other.

d) Service of mankind. Finally, clerical secular Institutes pay particular attention to one sphere of the priestly life which is easily in danger of not receiving sufficient consideration: the relationship with all men whom priests both within and without their official duties are meeting and serving. They approach them as fellow human beings and brothers in an attitude of modesty, openness and goodwill. Priests in the secular Institutes endeavour to meet every man in a spirit of openness, understanding and friendliness and, in their own sphere of influence, to promote good human interpersonal relationships.

¹² Cf *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 8.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 9.

In the achievement of these goals priests will find great help in the possession of those virtues which are deservedly esteemed in human affairs, such as goodness of heart, sincerity, strength and constancy of character, zealous pursuit of justice, civility and those other traits which the apostle Paul commends, saying: 'Whatever things are true, whatever honourable, whatever just, whatever holy, whatever lovable, whatever of good repute, if there be any virtue, if anything worthy of praise, think upon these things'.¹⁴

Priests of secular Institutes are concerned to master these four spheres of their priestly life with deeper insight and to inspire them with the spirit of the gospel. Fellowship with the bishop, relations with the presbyterium, co-operation with the laity, service of mankind, are basic characteristics of the secular way of life in which they follow the evangelical counsels. Since the above mentioned four tasks are common to all diocesan priests, it is naturally significant that the members of a secular Institute are not outwardly distinguishable from other diocesan priests. They are completely and utterly convinced of the importance of the duty allotted to them in the diocese by the Spirit of Christ, and they see therein their mission and the way to their own sanctification. In this conviction they follow the invitation of the Lord and commit themselves to the observance of the evangelical counsels, in order the better to perform their service in the diocese. They choose a way of life which helps them to model their lives more exactly on Christ and to be all things to all men. In all this there is revealed a secret freedom of the Holy Spirit: just as the movement of the Spirit of God is never impeded, so too the form of sanctity within the Church can never ultimately be contained within the categories of ecclesiastical statutes: it completely overflows them, yet does not destroy them; it conditions them while at the same time passing far beyond them.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.