

THE INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF SECULAR INSTITUTES

By ARMANDO OBERTI

IN 1963, AT A MEETING of heads (*responsabili*) of secular Institutes, held at Venasque, it was decided to repeat the experience; and the tentative theme chosen for the next reunion was formation. A study group was set up, which, after a series of meetings stretching over more than two years, produced a document on this theme which was to serve as a starting-point for an international congress of secular Institutes. However, the following year, 1967, saw the publication of the apostolic constitution *Regimini Ecclesiae universae*, which announced the reorganization of the Congregation for Religious, and established a separate section for secular Institutes. It was appropriate that those heads of secular Institutes appointed to hold office in this section should take new initiatives designed to facilitate the inter-relationship of secular Institutes. They called a meeting in March, 1968, of heads of various secular Institutes,¹ having in mind the following objectives: to help the various Institutes to get to know one another; to further an exchange of ideas on the actual situation of secular Institutes; to see whether a general congress of secular Institutes was opportune, and to take the preliminary steps for its organization; to make a first judgement on the proposal to set up a conference or union of heads of secular Institutes, in accordance with the directives of the decree *Perfectae Caritatis*.² All those taking part in the meeting were agreed that an international congress and the subsequent setting up of a union of heads of secular Institutes would be most beneficial. The meeting also served to bring to the notice of the Sacred Congregation the

¹ The following Institutes were represented at this meeting on 17 March, 1968: Compagnia di San Paolo; Missionarie degli Infermi; Cordis Jesu; Caritas Christi; The Grail; Missionari della Regalità di Nostro Signore Gesù Cristo; Oblates Missionaires de Marie Immaculée; Missionarie della Regalità di Nostro Signore Gesù Cristo; Apostole del Sacro Cuore; Filiae Reginae Apostolorum; Milites Christi Regis.

² *Perfectae Caritatis*, 23.

general misunderstanding about the nature of secular Institutes, particularly on the part of many priests engaged in pastoral work.

As a result of this meeting, the Congregation immediately formed a committee to settle procedures and the agenda for an international congress.³ The committee first met on 27 April 1968; its aims and the scope of the congress itself were succinctly described by Mgr Mauro, then secretary of the Congregation, in the following terms:

The task we have set ourselves is no small one: to enrich and to strengthen a new form of evangelical life which will harmonize with the needs and the life of the Church of our time. It is with this object in view that we have decided to organize a Congress of representatives of all the secular Institutes, who, by sharing the wealth of their own experience and the principles affirmed by the second Vatican Council, will be able to define more accurately the proper means and ends of these Institutes, and at the same time establish, from a doctrinal and practical view-point, the essential landmarks of this new way... The Sacred Congregation is entirely at the disposition of this committee, but prefers to remain 'on the side-lines', so as to leave it entirely free to work in its own way and to formulate its own conclusions.

Within two months this committee had drawn up precise proposals concerning the general theme of the Congress, the date and place, the time-table of the programme, a list of those to be invited, the method to be followed in the preparatory work, the financing, the actual procedures of the Congress, and the setting up of the union of heads of secular Institutes.

With regard to the actual theme of the Congress, the committee felt that, in view of the continuing and widespread confusion concerning the nature of secular Institutes, the Congress ought to consider primarily the *dimensions of the consecration to God proper to these Institutes*. The intention was to pinpoint once for all the characteristics of consecration in the world. In the unanimous judgement of the committee, this consecration does not separate the person from the world, as is the case with religious consecration; rather, it inserts him into the world, as it were, under a new title and gives

³ The heads (or representatives) of the following Institutes were asked to join this committee: Prêtres du Sacré-Coeur (France); The Grail (England); Cordis Jesu (Italy); Servitium Christi (Holland); Our Lady of the Wayside (Austria); Milites Christi Regis (Italy); Caritas Christi (France); Missionarie della Regalità (Italy); Notre-Dame de Vie (France); Missionari della Regalità (Italy); Missionarie degli Infermi (Italy); Acies Christi (Spain).

him that freedom of action in the world which derives from living the evangelical counsels.

Initially, this committee proposed that the Congress should be held in February 1969; but difficulties encountered in fixing an early date for consultation with the Sacred Congregation necessitated a postponement. It was not until 7 December 1968 that the chairman of the committee was able to send to the secular Institutes the first communication announcing the setting up of the committee and the programme of the Congress, which was then provisionally set for May 1969. This announcement received an enthusiastic welcome from a great many Institutes.⁴

However, the Sacred Congregation suggested a further postponement until 1970, in order to allow certain problems to be clarified on the national and international level, so as to avoid possible conflict. It was about this time that a commission, consisting of representatives of the Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, of the Congregation for the Clergy and of the Council of the Laity (*Consilium de Laicis*), was established to consider the requests of certain secular Institutes for 'a juridical status different from the status which at present distinguishes them'. This commission was, however, a non-starter.

Meantime, the organizing committee and the individual Institutes began to exchange reports and documents which proved very informative concerning the actual situation across the whole spectrum of the different Institutes. The results of these exchanges may be summed up briefly as follows. Some Institutes were secular only in name: their organization seemed to be aimed at justifying those theologians and canon lawyers who were concerned to include the secular Institutes among the great family of 'Religious'. Other Institutes envisaged for themselves new conceptions of consecration which seemed to render meaningless its traditional and fundamental obligations. A few wished to throw out the triple obligation of the evangelical counsels in favour of a more general vow of consecration. As a result, the work of the committee was channelled into a precise, detailed discussion of themes for individual papers and of those who were to be invited to prepare them. What constantly came to the fore in all this preparatory discussion was the meaning of the two

⁴ By 24 February, 1969, the support of 76 Institutes, out of 94 invited, was already assured. By the same date only one negative answer had been received, from the *Opus Dei*, which, as is now widely known, no longer wishes to be called a secular Institute.

terms 'consecration' and 'secularity' and the relationship between them. This was clearly seen to be the root of the new kind of vocation raised up by the Spirit in the Church, especially during recent years, and acknowledged by the Church in the documents establishing the secular Institutes.⁵

Eventually, the committee was able to draw up the complete programme for the Congress, the list of the conferences and speakers, and a draft of the statutes for the proposed union of heads of secular Institutes; and the date of the Congress was fixed for September, 1970. The programme announced the following papers and reports:

Consecration in the Church: Fr Jean Beyer S. J.
 Consecration and Secularity: Professor Giuseppe Lazzati
 Apostolic Dimension of Secular Institutes: Dr Giancarlo Brasca
 Evangelical Obligations in the life of Secular Institutes:
Obedience: Professor Hans Urs von Balthasar
Poverty: Mlle Jeanne Metge
Chastity: Fr José Moreno de la Helguera

All this was communicated to each Institute and to the Sacred Congregation at the beginning of 1970. Meantime, national meetings of secular Institutes were held in France, Germany, Austria, Canada, Spain and Italy; whilst each Institute embarked on a programme of discussion and reflection. In this way, even before the Congress met, the process of 'getting to know' each other began, along with the initial exchange of ideas and experiences; all of which proved of great value for the Congress itself.

On 20 April, 1970, copies of the draft statutes for the proposed union of heads of secular Institutes were sent out to all Institutes that had indicated their support for the Congress: eighty-eight out of a total of a hundred originally invited.

Shortly afterwards, the Sacred Congregation pointed out that 'the heads of Secular Institutes will need to hold discussions on the opportuneness and the terms of reference of an international union of the same heads before proceeding to the examination of the statutes. Should they consider such a union opportune, the statutes could be approved by the Holy See'.

It was on 12 June, when all the preparatory work was completed,

⁵ The Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater* of 2 February, 1947; the *Motu Proprio, Primo Feliciter* of 12 March, 1948; and the Instruction of the Sacred Congregation for Religious, *Cum Sanctissimus Dominus* of 19 March, 1948.

that the Sacred Congregation sent out an official invitation to all Institutes to take part in the Congress. In the event, 430 members attended, representing 93 Institutes from 27 different countries.⁶

The short address of welcome at the opening of the Congress was given by the chairman of the organizing committee, Professor Lazzati. We think it worthwhile to refer in detail to the announcement which he made concerning a new Pontifical Commission.⁷ Its terms of reference are to investigate the nature, image, characteris-

⁶ The following is a break-down of officially approved secular Institutes on 20 September 1970:

a) Institutes of papal jurisdiction		21	
Institutes of diocesan jurisdiction		<u>79</u>	
Total		100	
b) Mixed Institutes (priests, laymen and women)		2	
Women's Institutes		82	
Priests' Institutes		4	
Mens' Institutes		3	
Mixed Institutes of priests and laymen		<u>9</u>	
Total		100	
c) Members of secular Institutes of women, approx.		30,000	
Members of secular Institutes of priests, approx.		3,000	
Members of secular Institutes of laymen, approx.		400	
d) Distribution of the Institutes according to their country of origin.			
Austria	3	England	2
Belgium	1	Italy (including four not founded in	
Brazil	3	that country)	43
Canada	5	Jugoslavia	1
Czecho-Slovakia	1	Mexico	1
Dominican Republic	1	Holland	1
France	17	Portugal	1
Germany	5	Spain	10
		Switzerland	3
		Uruguav	1

(Several groups, in process of formation, asked to be allowed to send observers to the Congress.)

⁷ Serving on this Commission, under the chairmanship of the Very Rev. P. Heston, Secretary of the Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, with Fr Paul Molinari, S.J. as Secretary, are the following experts: the theologians Hans Urs von Balthasar and Fr Benoit Duroux, O.P.; the canonists Fr Bidagor, S.J., and Mgr Herranz of the *Opus Dei*; the Bishops Mgr Sabattani and Vilnet; Mgr Uyleembroeck of the Council of the Laity, and Fr Loew, founder of the Mission de S. Pierre et S. Paul; and finally, the following representatives of secular Institutes: the Rev Calvo of the Sacerdoti Operai Diocesani, Professor Lazzati of the Istituto Cristo Rè, the Rev Mayr, O.S.B., founder of the Istituto di S Bonifacio, Dr Miceli of the Missionarie della Regalità, and Miss Barrenachea.

tics and apostolate of secular Institutes in the light of the doctrinal and practical developments which have taken place since the promulgation of *Provida Mater Ecclesia* in the sociological and pastoral context: in particular,

- i) the distinction of secular Institutes from simple associations
- ii) the nature of the unifying bond and the organizational form of secular Institutes
- iii) the apostolate of the various Institutes in the light of their original constitutions and in the post-conciliar context
- iv) special problems posed by some Institutes:⁸ for example, the drafting of statutes which might serve as a model for those secular Institutes which might eventually become simple associations of priests or lay-folk⁹
- v) other relevant questions which the Commission might judge it necessary or useful to examine

The announcement was welcomed by the Congress as an indication of the Holy See's willingness to tackle the problems which have emerged in the life of the secular Institutes in the twenty-three years since their canonical recognition (2 February, 1947), and to proceed on that basis to give the necessary doctrinal and practical clarification.

The inaugural lecture of Cardinal Antoniutti, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, elaborated on this theme of clarification. It expressed complete trust in the secular Institutes 'acknowledged in the Church of today as a new Spring of promise and hope': all the more so because 'in these tormented and confused times they have fulfilled their apostolate in a spirit of admirable discipline'. It made frequent and emphatic reference to secularity, the characteristic mark of the secular Institute and its *raison d'être*:

While the clergy and laity who become religious change their juridical status and their public and social relations in the Church, submitting themselves to the laws proper to the religious state with its corresponding rights and duties, the clergy and laity who are incorporated in secular Institutes remain as they were: the lay person remains a lay

⁸ A particular case, I understand, requiring to be examined is the request from Mgr Ancel, Superior of the *Del Prado* Institute, for a different dependence of his Institute, composed of priests and laymen, in regard to the administrative bodies of the roman Curia.

⁹ I should point out that, at least at the present time, secular Institutes envisaging such a change are very few indeed.

person in the world, and the cleric, who was before subject to his Ordinary, is now doubly subject, bound to him by a new bond of submission; and in neither case can they be called or considered religious.

The Cardinal gave further precision to this secularity:

It is identified with the positive and substantial idea of 'one who lives as a man among men', as 'a christian among christians in the world'; one who has 'the consciousness of being one among others', and at the same time has 'the certainty of a vocation, sanctioned by the Church, to a total and stable consecration of himself to God and to souls'.¹⁰

As for the distinction between religious and secular Institutes, this was said to be 'complete and precise' and furthermore 'intrinsic'. Thus the legislation concerning the secular Institutes must be 'so formulated as to exclude any and every confusion with that of religious Institutes, and must be precisely expressed in terms that leave no opening for erroneous interpretations'.

In this opening discourse, the Congress at once found its proper wave-length; many of the delegates discovered in it the motives inspiring their own Institutes, while others saw there pointers to the solution of obvious problems. It was not, in fact, on the level of secularity that the Congress, in its long drawn-out debates,¹¹ registered divergence of opinions. Equally, there was no substantial difference of view concerning the dynamic relation between secularity and consecration realized by means of the evangelical counsels. The universal hope here was that the theologians and the magisterium of the Church would assist the secular Institutes more and more fully to deepen their awareness of their own place and task in the Church and the world of today, but in true loyalty both to the original charism of each Institute and to the double inspiration and motivation of their existence and activity: secularity and consecration.

There was, however, a certain amount of disagreement arising out of the first three papers, read respectively by Fr Beyer (*Consecration in the Church*), Professor Lazzati (*Consecration and Secularity*), and Dr Brasca (*Apostolic Dimension of Secular Institutes*). Some of the delegates suspected that a common stand had been deliberately taken here, with the purpose of excluding Institutes with their own

¹⁰ The Cardinal is here opposing the view expressed by Fr E. Mazzoli in his recent book, *Gli Istituti Secolari* (Milan, 1969). See the comments of Fr J. Beyer, *infra*, pp 98-100.

¹¹ The Congress was divided into fifteen study groups; six for the italian speaking delegates, three french, two spanish, one german, one english, and two for priests.

'works', in which their members are engaged either on the professional or the apostolic level, from the overall category of secular Institutes. These delegates were able to express the hope that there would be, within the general framework of secular Institutes as in that of religious Institutes, a *pluralism* of forms such as would allow Institutes with 'works' of their own to co-exist side by side with Institutes that are simply present in the ordinary structures of the world.

The debate on pluralism also had its repercussions in the two study groups made up of priests: there exist at the moment some secular Institutes for priests who remain incardinated in their dioceses of origin, whilst in others the members become incardinated in their Institutes.¹² A special meeting of the heads of Institutes present at the Congress proposed that this question of pluralism be entrusted to the Pontifical Commission which, in the months ahead, would have to put forward proposals for a new classification of secular Institutes.

I do not consider it within the scope of this paper to go into further detail about the actual business of the Congress. In any case, the full *Acta* will be published in due time. Instead I would like to draw attention to the question proposed by the Congress for further research by the Institutes themselves. It is here that the real significance of the Congress will be found, as well as the potential future of secular Institutes in the actual historical situation. It is within this general framework that certain emphases have to be made, which emerged from the group-work on the three papers on Obedience, Poverty and Chastity, read respectively by Dr von Balthasar, Mlle Jeanne Metge, and Fr Moreno de la Helguera.

¹² It is significant that, since Vatican II, the competent authority has not approved any secular Institutes for priests with incardination into the Institutes. On 20 April, 1966, the post-conciliar Commission for Religious set out the following principles concerning secular Institutes for priests:

- i) Priests belonging to secular Institutes remain diocesan in the full sense according to the norms of canon law.
- ii) Profession of the evangelical counsels does not affect the spirit of diocesan priesthood or the obediencial relationship to the Bishop: rather the reverse.
- iii) If there is any conflict between the superiors of such Institutes and the Bishop with regard to the priestly ministry and office, it is the Bishop's judgment which is to be followed.
- iv) The same holds in any case of conflict between Institute and diocesan obligations.

While the problem of pluralism gave rise to communications¹³ from a variety of quarters which showed a substantial convergence of basic meaning, the same cannot be said of the reactions to the other papers. The purpose of these communications was to present the counsels as authentically evangelical values, and thus to show why the secular Institutes have embraced them from the beginning; as well as the particular ways in which they profess them in their constant attention to that secularity which is their *raison d'être*.

The predominantly theological style of the first paper, supported by a too narrow choice of concrete examples, the somewhat existential approach of the second paper which lacked the necessary juridical references, and the tone of the third paper, pitched mainly in a psychological key, had already of themselves provoked a variety of reactions. The delegates discussed at length the limits of personal responsibility as they appeared to emerge from the first paper, and the absence of obligations which, it was thought, could be detected in the second paper. (The third paper was not discussed owing to lack of time.) It can be said, however, that the reports submitted by the study groups all manifested a substantial acceptance of secular consecration, or, perhaps, of consecrated secularity, and a constant preoccupation with the secular commitment. A radically new bid was made for the three evangelical counsels to be seen as the characteristic means for effecting consecration, even in secular Institutes.

It is not surprising that there was a clear-cut confrontation of positions in the assembly of the heads of Institutes, where the proposal for an international conference (union) of heads of secular Institutes was at once submitted for examination. The organizing committee of the Congress had provided the delegates with a document setting out the proposal, which was read out at the opening session in the form of a draft statute submitted for examination and eventual re-phrasing; with the further proposal that there should be a session for the election of representatives who would form part of the steering committee for this conference or union. This precision of organization led some to suspect – and this was especially true amongst the german-speaking delegates – that everything had been skilfully ‘prefabricated in Rome’, and reflected the predominance of the italian secular Institutes. The very real danger of deep division

¹³ One such communication had been prepared by the priests of Schoënstatt, a second by the french group of delegates, a third by the german group, and a fourth by the french-speaking group of priests.

here was obviated by patient contacts between the different sides; and finally a proposal reconciling the various positions was hammered out and unanimously carried. The proposal was to set up a Provisional International Commission,¹⁴ entrusted with the following tasks:

- a) to promote the collaboration of secular Institutes on an international level
- b) to facilitate the exchange of experiences of collaboration on a national and regional scale
- c) to put before the ecclesiastical authorities and the whole Church the common interests of secular Institutes
- d) to study the setting up of a definitive form of international collaboration of secular Institutes which would be acceptable to the majority of the Institutes.¹⁵

The formula adopted, and the far-reaching tasks assigned to the Provisional Commission, sustains the hopes of those who look forward to an organization representative of all the secular Institutes; one which will be an instrument for continuing the dialogue begun at the Congress, and so guarantee the continuation of the exchanges of experience initiated there. The provisional nature of the Commission should at least give time for a more mature deliberation in which all the Institutes will be called upon to collaborate.

A high point in the Congress was undoubtedly the audience with the Holy Father. His address touched on the fundamental themes of the Congress. It presented the consecration of the evangelical counsels – an amplified expression of the original consecration of baptism – as legitimately lived in the secular milieu: ‘that is, in the form common to all in this temporal life, in apostolic perspective, at the service of the men and of the world of today, in a spirit of great love for the whole Church’.

The Pope’s address was particularly comprehensive and thought-

¹⁴ The following delegates were elected to serve on this Commission according to national groupings: four from Italian secular Institutes, two from German-speaking, two from the Spanish and Portuguese, two from France and Belgium, one for Latin America, one for Canada, one from English-speaking, and two from the Institutes of priests.

¹⁵ The Provisional Commission met for the first time on 26 September, 1970, immediately after the closure of the International Congress. The following nominations were made: President, Mlle Gabrielle Lachance (Canada); Vice-President, Fr Jean Canivez (France); Secretary, Fr Emilio Tresalti (Italy). At the same session sub-commissions were also set up to study 1) the *Acta* of the Congress, 2) Communications between the Institutes, and 3) the juridical framework for the future permanent international Union. A second session of this Commission was held in Rome on 6 December, 1970.

provoking on most of the issues debated at the Congress: but it left one important question, remarked on particularly by the priests who were present at the audience. Why on earth had the Pope said not a word about the secular Institutes for priests, seeing that the Congress was for Institutes of layfolk and of priests? The Pontifical Commission already mentioned will doubtless provide a direct or indirect answer to the question, was the Pope's silence a respectful reticence on an open question (does the form of the secular Institute correspond with that Association of Priests who wish to walk the way of the evangelical counsels? And what constitutes the secularity of such Institutes?), or was it the first tentative pointer to a new approach to the problem?

Finally, something must be said about the resolutions approved in the special assembly of the heads of the secular Institutes. They dealt with the following points:

- i) The hope that further and deeper studies on the nature of secular Institutes will be made by theologians (proposed by the french group), and by the *Magisterium* (proposed by the italian-speaking group).
- ii) The desire for a sound pluralism among secular Institutes: one that will prove to be a providential stimulus for their development rather than an obstacle generating confusion and difficulties (presented by Professor G. Lazzati as a synthesis of all the proposals on pluralism).
- iii) A resolution that the distinction between religious and secular Institutes may be more clear-cut at the level of the departments of the roman Curia and their spheres of competence.
- iv) A proposal for the erection of a provisional representative Commission of secular Institutes, to draw up permanent forms of collaboration and communication at international level between the secular Institutes themselves (moved by Fr Buhler, a german parish priest, and by the compiler of these notes).
- v) A proposal for the publication of a review for secular Institutes (moved by the spanish group), and for the introduction of an exchange of documents and other writings (moved by the italian-speaking priests' group).

It is pleasant to record, in conclusion, that the Congress paid a special prayerful tribute to the memory of Pius XII, the pope responsible for the documents which gave canonical recognition as secular Institutes to the various associations which, especially during the first half of this century, had set out on the road towards 'consecration in the world'.