

THE IDENTITY OF THE SECULAR INSTITUTE

By EMILIO TRESALTI

MARCH of this year is the thirtieth anniversary of the 'Motu Proprio' *Primo feliciter*, promulgated by Pius XII twelve months after the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia*. As a consequence of these papal pronouncements, the Sacred Congregation for Religious published the Instruction *Cum Sanctissimus*, which set out the norms 'for the primary establishment and firm structuring of secular Institutes: incomplete and provisional certainly, but equally fundamental'.¹

The time is fast approaching for the promulgation of 'the complete and definitive statutes with regard to secular Institutes'. At least, we can say that they are in process of being drafted. All the secular Institutes have given serious consideration to the schema of the new law for Institutes of the life consecrated by the profession of the evangelical counsels. In fact, the World Conference of Secular Institutes (CMIS) has been asked for its views, and its executive Council has consulted all the Institutes on the matter, as its statutes require.² The same duty devolves on the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, as well as on all the bishops and the representative bodies of the religious. The present time, then, is one of crucial importance. Indeed, for secular Institutes, it might be called the moment of truth.

It is this same truth which leads me to attempt here to state clearly what we are. What is said is intended neither as a comment on nor a criticism of the draft law; which is, in any case, a 'reserved' document, and one that could not be so treated in the space of an article. At the same time, the intention is not to launch an academic discussion. It is simply an attempt to describe as lucidly as possible what we are and what we are not, in order to help those whose task it is to give legal form to practical realities, without distorting or changing them; so that, in the true spirit of *Primo feliciter*, they might

¹ The Apostolic Constitution, *Provida Mater Ecclesia*, was published on 2 February 1947, and the 'Motu Proprio' *Primo feliciter* on 12 March 1948; the Instruction *Cum Sanctissimus* was issued on 19 March 1948.

² The official title is the french *Conférence Mondiale des Instituts Séculiers*.

succeed in bringing to its completion the first document on secular Institutes, in accordance with the intention of Pius XII.³

The theological foundations of secular Institutes

Secular Institutes give expression to the worldliness of the Church: a worldliness that is at once consecrated and effective of consecration. In some sort they form the cutting edge of the people of God; as well as providing a centre of research into this worldliness.⁴ By the phrase, 'the worldliness of the Church', we move away from matters mundane and turn our gaze on to the mystery of the Incarnate Christ: 'The Word was made flesh'. The Word of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, the Holy One, the pre-eminently Sacred, the Wholly Other, the Eternal, the Ineffable, the Ancient of days, becomes flesh, corruptible, mortal, profane, contaminated, changeable, bound by time, worldly, non-priestly.

The Word becomes the 'non-word', in order that the 'non-word' might find its voice.⁵ So it is that, in the phrase of von Balthasar, the 'non-word' becomes the focal point of the Word. In this movement of condescension, what was never sacred is consecrated, sanctified, vivified, lifted up, redeemed, purified, healed, set free. The Incarnation of the Word brings forth a 'consecrated worldliness' which is Jesus Christ himself: God and man, true God and true man. And everyman in Christ Jesus is holy, consecrated, deified. In him contradictions are transcended, contraries reconciled. For everyman in Christ Jesus the power, lost by original sin, to become one who sanctifies, consecrates, liberates, divinizes the world around him, becomes his again. He can fulfil his God-given mandate to bring the world to its fulness by his knowledge and his husbandry.

³ I would like to emphasize here, for the sake of those brethren of mine who are priest-members of secular Institutes, that what I have to say does not affect in any way my profound esteem for their Institutes and for each one of them individually. It is because of the deep and genuine friendship which I have for so many of them and my respect for this friendship that I am persuaded to make certain observations which at first sight might appear hurtful — an attempt to damage or minimize their vocation. This is certainly not my intention; indeed I believe that what I say will help us all to clarify what each of us consider ourselves to be, and this can only be for the good of the Church and of all her children.

I must also make it clear that whilst I am presenting the fruits of my personal reflections, I have been profoundly influenced by thorough-going exchanges over several years with very responsible and qualified people. Certainly there is nothing here of the individualist or of a more or less fertile imagination.

⁴ Cf Paul VI, 'Address to the Superiors General (*Responsabili*) of secular Institutes', in *Dialogue*, vol IV (September 1976), nos 22-23.

The words séculier, secolare and sécularité, secolarità have as little meaning in french and italian, we suspect, as do secular and secularity in english. We have again preferred worldly and worldliness, in spite of the fact that these words are habitually used pejoratively. Cf Supplement to the Way, 12 (Spring, 1971), p 45, note 2. Ed.

⁵ Cf Hans Urs von Balthasar: *Theologie: Neuer Bund* (Einsiedeln, 1969).

Worldliness as the expression of the stooping of the Incarnation of the Word, which has its term in Jesus Christ, cannot be other than a characteristic note of the Church in her entirety, and also as she exists in each one of her members. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World is witness to this:

The Church . . . is made up of human beings, members of the earthly city, called to form the family of God's children across the face of human history, a family which is to go on growing until the Lord's coming in glory. . . . The Church . . . is in pilgrimage in the company of all humankind; she experiences the same earthly condition as does the world. . . . The Church, in each one of her members and through her whole community, is convinced that she has a large contribution to offer for the human growth of the family of mankind and for its history.⁶

More than this: we can distinguish between the world, secular life, the flesh, and the divine life, grace and consecration, in the way in which we must distinguish the divine and the human in Jesus Christ. Exactly the same distinction must be made between worldliness and consecration; and if we emphasize, as we must, what is called the theandric unity in Christ, similarly we cannot separate worldliness and consecration. It is also true that the Church, both in her entirety and in all her members, must work for the completion, the prolongation, the fulfilment of the mystery of the Incarnation, the Redemption: the mystery, that is, of Christ Jesus. All this is already realized, and yet is in the process of realization.

How, then, does the Church find in her structures this worldliness? How does she turn her face towards the world? If we ponder the mystery of the Church as it is presented, for example, in the dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, there are two images which rivet our attention — of a people and of a body. Both of them, in common with many others proffered in the same Constitution, point up a structural difference which corresponds to the functional and the dynamic. They remind us, as well, of the sacramental nature of the Church which extends and expresses anew the sacramentality of Christ himself. What is unseen influences what is seen; and this in turn acquires a fuller visibility from the same influence. So the whole Church is directed towards the growth of humankind, towards its radical freedom, so that all men and every man might come to the perfection of Christ's own manhood. Everyman is thus one with the world that surrounds him, with his own space, which is not a void but full of the stuff of creation, both inert elements and those fashioned by his own activity. This is the scene of everyman, of his history continuously and dynamically evolving, a history determining him as well as being determined by him.

It is here that the Church elaborates and articulates her mission, through her ministries and by means of many different graces. Some of these

⁶ *Gaudium et Spes*, 40.

ministries are underpinned by a special sacrament which distils and gives shape to baptismal grace and is rooted in the character imparted by baptism itself. Such is ordination in its threefold form of episcopate, priesthood and diaconate; or marriage which gives strength to the ministry of parenthood. There are other functions which receive their Christ-like form from baptism and confirmation; these are the various ministries of the unordained and the functions of the laity. This latter finds its immediate and direct expression in worldliness, in the strict sense of the word, as described in the dogmatic Constitution on the Church.⁷ It is in this sense, also, that worldliness can be called the proper characteristic of the laity, even as is the consecration of the world.⁸

It is worth remarking that the worldliness described in the document is not to be taken in the casual way in which it often is; rather it should be seen as the elucidation and elaboration of the radical worldliness of the Church herself. In this context, it is descriptive both of her structure and of her office in their coherence. If this coherence is to be identified and given a role, if it is to be presented in terms of function, certainly we cannot say that worldliness finds its primary expression in hierarchy or in the ministries of the ordained and unordained. Rather it is seen to be the attribute of the lay function, characteristic of laity. To say this is in no way to depreciate the value, the special nature or the necessity of the ministries we have mentioned, whether belonging to the ordained or the unordained, nor of those who discharge them; nor is it at all prejudicial to the different charisms, recognized or unrecognized, incarnated in individuals or in groups within the bosom of the Church. For these are the graces whose purpose is to give life to the various functions and ministries; they also put into relief specific values which become living examples to the people of God. They are, as it were, the glands which secrete the hormones of the body of Christ which is the Church.

At the same time, one cannot deny that the laity too have their ecclesial speciality, or that there is a special attribute enriching the Church in its mission to the world — a worldly mission, in fact. To do so would be to mutilate the body of Christ, to equiparate, by a *reductio ad absurdum*, the Church with its hierarchy; it would be to inflate to monstrous proportions the value of ordination, to alienate the Church from the world, to separate the leaven from the dough and the salt from the earth.

The precise task of the secular Institutes is to effect the synthesis of worldliness and consecration,⁹ so that the resulting consecrated worldliness might itself become a consecrating force. By living according to the style of the secular Institute, a Christian takes up the Church's worldliness in the same way as every lay person. To consecrate oneself, to hand oneself over in

⁷ Cf *Lumen Gentium*, 31.

⁸ Cf Pius XII: Address to the second world congress on the apostolate of the laity, Rome, 5-13 October 1957.

⁹ Cf Moioli, Giovanni: 'Considerazione teologiche sugli Istituti secolari', in *La Scuola Cattolica*, 5 (1964), pp 387-424.

this way continually and wholeheartedly with a definitive ecclesial pledge in a life-commitment where this worldly mission assumes a moral tone which resonates in the consciousness of the ecclesial community as well as in the heart of the person: this is indeed a special vocation.¹⁰

Work, management of temporal affairs, the organization of society, the building up of the earthly city and the dynamic nature of history, all of which for the lay person is the stuff of consecration in so far as it assimilates him to Christ and makes him an instrument of Christ: all this is certainly 'special', since it raises him to a level of self-awareness and self-acceptance that is free and deliberate. This is what we mean by the 'special consecration' of the member of the secular Institute.¹¹

How different is this form of consecration from that which declares its presence in the world by means of the ministry of the word; by public prayer linked to the professed state, which is the liturgy of the monk or the canon regular; by a poverty of renunciation which assimilates a person to the materially deprived — the little brothers and sisters of Jesus; by work for the sick, prisoners, the handicapped, those on the fringes of society — the various congregations whose purpose is the corporal works of mercy; by teaching, and so on. There is the further difference from those who are consecrated to stress and put on record eschatological values in the Church by an attitude of separation or total flight from the world — the contemplative communities and the anchorites. All these are in the world in one way or another; they are not strangers to it. However, their relationship with it is certainly different in tone and temper.

The ecclesial attribute of worldliness-consecration is thus incarnated and lived out in different modes in the coherent structures and functions of the Church. It cannot be reduced to pure worldliness or to simple consecration. Neither element can stand alone; it is one, as Christ is one.

It is clear, then, that the way in which the evangelical counsels (we shall return to these terms later on) are understood in the various forms of ecclesial life will differ in accord with this diversity. The poverty which consists in a clear and definite renunciation of certain goods, or in the holding of all things in common, so as to proclaim the absolute dependence of the individual on the community, assumes for the religious a function which confronts and even judges the world. It emphasizes the absolute freedom of the Church who receives her nourishment and strength from God alone. In the secular Institute, however, poverty becomes the administration of goods, the distribution of riches which bears fruit in a direct engagement with the world. That celibacy or virginity which, as an expression of single-minded love, may have its source in a prayer that is characteristic of a life-

¹⁰ Cf Paul VI: Address to the participants at the international Congress of Secular Institutes, Rome, 26 September 1970.

¹¹ Cf Paul VI: Address to the Superiors General (*Responsabili*) of Secular Institutes, 20 September 1972.

commitment, or in devotion to the neighbour through the ministry of the gospel, or in the works of mercy in the various forms of 'religious' life, finds a different modality in the secular Institute. There, it is the unconditional availability to others and to the temporal engagement: one which does not find the legitimate demands of family an obstacle in the path of an engagement flexible enough to come to fruition in those difficult situations demanding a total detachment.

Wherever the actual situations of the lay person, the monk, the ordained minister and the religious are profoundly different, there the poverty of the layman will be found to differ from that of the rest. The same is true of the celibacy of the priest, the sister and the laity. In the traditional forms of religious life, the counsels are necessary as signs of consecration. Their purpose is to give expression to that definitive separation from and renunciation of the evil endemic in the world: one which belongs to christian existence by virtue of baptism. At the same time, the specific sign of special consecration for the laity must always be wholly interior, visible only in works of charity.

The secular Institute as a form of ecclesial life

Secular Institutes take on a style of life which is characterized by this combination of worldliness and consecration. It is the essential attribute of the laity to be inserted into this worldliness in the true sense; so that the members of secular Institutes discharge tasks which are typically lay: building the world and the earthly city, acting as a preservative and as a leaven; in a word, consecration from within. This is the form of life for the sake of which they receive and live out the charism of a special dedication: one that finds concrete expression in celibacy, in a use of material goods which enables them to be offered to God, in a style of behaviour which imbues the whole of their lives and their every choice with an assured adherence to the divine design. Such are the dispositions which, in the history of the Church, have found their legal expression in terms of the 'evangelical counsels': poverty, chastity and obedience.

Let us look a little further into these 'counsels'. Are they such as can be followed or not by those who accept them? Or are they not rather to be received as gifts with a view to the common good, as graces, as invitations; so that those endowed with them have no longer any choice? This is certainly the teaching of Vatican Council II:

The holiness of the Church is especially sustained by the several counsels which the Lord sets out in the Gospel. . . . Foremost among these is the precious gift of divine grace conferred by the Father on certain of his children, which enables them more readily to consecrate themselves with undivided heart to him alone in virginity or celibacy. . . . The evangelical counsels constitute a divine gift with which her Lord has endowed the Church. . . .¹²

¹² *Lumen Gentium*, 42-43.

The word 'counsels' calls for further examination in view of the fact that these dispositions have been given a precise legal definition in the three terms — poverty, chastity and obedience. As dispositions, they are demanded of every Christian, in accord with the call of each one, to be lived out in various ways; and though they flow through various kinds of living, there is nothing optional about them. However they are viewed, these dispositions are fundamental; they affect substantially that wholehearted love of God and neighbour which characterizes Jesus Christ's own dedication and is demanded of him by all his followers. Thus it is that those who are incorporated into him and follow him must be totally committed. They no longer have the freedom of the person who has not yet chosen God.

It is therefore unthinkable that this specific dedication, depending as it does on those three fundamental dispositions, should belong only to certain functions or to certain categories of church membership. This seems to be the message which the Spirit is bringing to the Church in these times by means of the secular Institutes. Can we say, then, that these Institutes stand for a form of consecrated life? Certainly we can; as long as the term 'consecrated life' is not restricted to a special category which is separated off from the rest of the christian brethren nor appropriates to itself the 'means of perfection' as though it had a monopoly of these ways to holiness. It is clear that the 'consecrated life' in such a sense does not exist; this would simply be to express in different terms the phrase 'state of perfection' or 'states of perfection', in the way it was understood until comparatively recently. Now we can say that the members of secular Institutes are consecrated by worldliness: that is, they accept a mission which belongs to the laity. At the risk of repeating oneself, it is a worldliness which gives precise expression to the more general worldliness of the Church: the cutting-edge of the christian lay vocation, which is in no way superior or inferior to the rest of the laity. In fact, members of secular Institutes, together with the others, make up that section of the people of God who accept the responsibility for the worldliness of the whole Church: 'the worldly character is the special attribute of lay people'.¹³

Here we must deal with an objection which is often stated: how can one speak of secular Institutes of priests, as is done in official documents of the magisterium of the Church? We must remember that the time of decisive clarification is imminent. One certainly cannot speak of clerical secular Institutes (or sacerdotal Institutes, if the term is preferred). This is a flat contradiction, a gross equivocation which serves only to obscure the facts as they are; it must be removed. This is not to take away from the worth of these associations of priests; it is merely to see them in their true light, to give them the place and weight which is rightly theirs, one which is only diminished and distorted by co-existence under the one umbrella, of a single

¹³ *Ibid.*, 31.

jurisdiction such as takes away from both groups the possibility of manifesting their own proper character and of achieving the results which their special charism can effect. Neither can it be argued that, if an Institute is composed of diocesan priests but does not, as an Institute, engage in priestly work, it need not be considered sacerdotal. If such an Institute has the responsibility of supporting and helping its members — and if it did not, it would have no reason for existing, then such help and support is integral with the vocation of the members; and this vocation is to the ordained ministry. It cannot therefore be called 'secular'; for it is not, nor can it be, specified by the worldliness which belongs in a special way to the laity; and, certainly, this worldliness is not the equivalent of non-incardination to the Institute.

A proposal

In the 'Motu Proprio' *Primo Feliciter* it is stated that the consecration of the members of the Institute is affected in its every aspect by this worldliness. Whence it follows that the elements of its special consecration cannot and must not dilute or distort this worldliness; otherwise, secular Institutes would be deprived of their very reason for existing, since they are rooted in it and founded on it. How, then, can secular Institutes be categorized under such a title as 'life consecrated by the profession of the evangelical counsels'? Quite apart from what we have been saying about secular Institutes, is such a category acceptable? If we are consecrated by worldliness, others are consecrated by the priestly ministry, others again by their witness to poverty, or by specific works of mercy. Is there such a thing as 'consecrated' life as such? It would seem not, at least in the strict sense.

The canonists must draw out the consequences and the legislators must make the necessary applications. If we might make a suggestion: one could speak of special consecration with respect to the main categories corresponding to the structure of the Church. In which case, as far as the secular Institutes are concerned, one must speak of it with respect to the laity. We should be able to say the same with respect to priests who take on particular tasks in partnership, of personal commitment, and so on. It should be clear enough that it is not a question of wishing to deny the possibility of a special consecration which gives expression to and derives from baptismal consecration, and thus becomes a moral and conscious acceptance, one that takes account of its practical circumstances. It is simply a matter of seeing the consecration in its true light. One must avoid affording motives for division and separation in the context of a special mission.

To address oneself to the problem in this way could be very wearying; it could also create apprehensions and fears. There is need for courage — the sort of courage that brought Pius XII to promulgate *Primo feliciter* a year after *Provida Mater*.