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PAUL VI

20 September 1972

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(...) There is a difference between your situation and that of the other lay people. You are indeed committed, as they are, to the secular values but as consecrated persons: that is, your commitment not only asserts the authenticity of human values, it also directs them towards the evangelical beatitudes. On the other hand you are not “Religious”: yet there is a similarity between your life and theirs because by your consecration you tell the world that spiritual and eschatological values count more than anything else and that Christian love is your “absolute”. Indeed the greater your love the greater its power to show that secular values are but relative and at the same time to help you and everybody to make the most of those values. Neither of these two aspects of your spiritual image can be overestimated without damaging the other. They are essential to each other.

(...)”Secularity” means that your place is in the world. But it does not mean simply a position, a function which happens to coincide with life in the world and a “secular” job or profession. It must mean, first and foremost a realization that you are in the world as “your very own field of Christian responsibility. To be in the world, that is, to be committed to secular values, is your way of being the Church, of making the Church present, of working out your own salvation and being heralds of redemption. The condition in which you live, your life description in human society becomes your theological self and your way of bringing salvation into the realm of reality for all the world to see. In this way you are an advance guard of

the Church “in the world”: you are yourselves an expression of the Church’s mind: to be in the world in order to shape it and sanctify it “as from within, like leaven in the dough” (Lumen Gentium, 31) a task, remember which falls mainly on the shoulders of the laity. You are a clear, tangible, telling proof of what the Church sets out to do for the building of the world of “Gaudium et spes “.

“Consecration”, on the other hand, indicates the personal, unseen structure supporting your inmost self and all you do. Here is the deep, hidden human potential for which the people you live with have no explanation, often no idea. Your baptismal consecration has been more deeply and strongly rooted by a greater claim of love. It is the stirring of the Holy Spirit. It is not identical with that of Religious. Nevertheless it impels you to a fundamental life option of the beatitudes of the Gospel, so that you are really consecrated and really in the world. “You are in the world and not of the world but for the world” as I said on another occasion. You live a true, genuine consecration according to the evangelical counsels but without the fullness of visibility proper to religious consecration which consists in a more strictly common way of life and the “sign” of the religious habit. Yours is a new and original form of consecration. It was the Holy Spirit that put this idea into the minds of the faithful, so that they could live in this way, still surrounded by the world’s realities and that the power of evangelical counsels - the divine values of eternity - should find their way into the heart of human, space time values.

The poverty, chastity and obedience which you have chosen are ways of sharing the cross of Christ because like him and with him you give up the things which, without any infringement of law or precept, you could, if you wished, have

and enjoy. But they are also ways of sharing the victory of the Risen Christ because they give you a new freedom. This world's values are always a threat to our openness of soul, complete availability to God.

Your vows take the sting out of it. Your poverty tells the world that it is possible to live with this life's good things and that we can make use of what makes for a more civilised life and progress without becoming slaves to any of it; your chastity tells the world of a selfless love, fathomless as God's own heart from which you draw it. Your obedience tells the world that a man can be happy without digging in his heels over the things which just suit him, and can be always completely open to God's will as seen in the daily grind, in the signs of the times and in the world's need, here and now, of salvation.

Hence your activity, whatever it may be, personal, professional, individual or common, is more distinctly signposted "To God": it is in fact all the time interwoven with your consecration and carried along with it. The unique providential way of things in your spirituality has given today's Church a new model secular life lived in consecration, consecrated life lived as secular. The Church is the richer for it.

Of all the good things brought into the world by Secular Institutes there is one upon which I would like to dwell for a moment –the tributary stream of consecrated ministerial priesthood which flows into the Secular Institutes carrying a goodly band of men who wish to add to their priestly life the bond of self giving which is profession of the evangelical counsels. As I think of these brothers of mine in the priesthood of Christ, I feel that I must encourage them. Here once more I see, and wonder at, the work of the Spirit ceaselessly rousing in men's hearts a restless yearning for greater perfection.

JOHN-PAUL II

3 February 1997

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Years ago, in addressing those taking part in the Second International Congress of Secular Institutes, I said that they were "so to speak, at the centre of the conflict that disturbs and divides the modern soul" (29 September 1980). With this statement I meant to re-examine several considerations of my venerable predecessor, Paul VI, who had spoken of Secular Institutes as the answer to a deep concern: that of finding the way of combining the full consecration of life according to the evangelical counsels and full responsibility for a presence and transforming action within the world, to mould, perfect and sanctify it (1972).

In fact, on the one hand we are witnessing the rapid spread of forms of religious expression offering fascinating experiences, which in some cases are exacting and demanding. The accent however is on the emotional and perceptible level of the experience, rather than the ascetical and spiritual. We can acknowledge that these forms of religious expression are an attempt to respond to a constantly renewed desire for communion with God, for the search for the ultimate truth about him and about humanity's destiny. They display the fascination of novelty and facile universalism. However these experiences imply an ambiguous concept of God which is far from that offered by Revelation. Furthermore, they prove to be detached from reality and humanity's concrete history. This religious expression contrasts with a false concept of secularity in which God has nothing to do with the building of humanity's future. The relationship with him should be

considered a private decision and a subjective question which at most can be tolerated as long as it does not claim to have any influence on culture or society.

How, then, should we face this terrible conflict which divides the heart and soul of contemporary humanity? It becomes a challenge for the Christian: the challenge to bring about a new synthesis of the greatest possible allegiance to God and his will, and the greatest possible sharing in the joys and hopes, worries and sorrows of the world, to direct them towards the plan of integral salvation which God the Father has shown us in Christ and continually makes available to us through the gift of the Holy Spirit. The members of Secular Institutes are committed precisely to this and express their full fidelity to the profession of the evangelical counsels in a form of secular life full of risks and often unforeseeable demands, but rich in a specific and original potential.

The humble yet daring bearers of the transforming power of God's kingdom and the courageous, consistent witnesses to the task and mission of the evangelization of cultures and peoples, the members of Secular Institutes, in history, are the sign of a Church which is the friend of men and can offer them comfort in every kind of affliction, ready to support all true progress in human life but at the same time intransigent towards every choice of death, violence, deceit and injustice. For Christians they are also a sign and a reminder of their duty, on God's behalf, to care for a creation which remains the object of its Creator's love and satisfaction, although marked by the contradictions of rebellion and sin and in need of being freed from corruption and death. Is it surprising that the environment with which they have to contend is often little inclined to understand and accept their witness?

The Church today looks to men and women who are capable of a renewed witness to the Gospel and its radical demands, amid the living conditions of the majority of human beings. Even the world, often without realizing it, wishes to meet the truth of the Gospel for humanity's true and integral progress, according to God's plan. In such a condition, great determination and clear fidelity to the charism proper to their consecration is demanded of the members of Secular Institutes: that of bringing about the synthesis of faith and life, of the Gospel and human history, of total dedication to the glory of God and of unconditional willingness to serve the fullness of life of their brothers and sisters in this world.

Members of Secular Institutes are by their vocation and mission at the crossroads between God's initiative and the longing of creation: God's initiative, which they bring the world through love and intimate union with Christ; the longing of creation, which they share in the everyday, secular condition of their fellow men and women, bearing the contradictions and hopes of every human being, especially the weakest and the suffering. Secular Institutes in any case are entrusted with the responsibility of reminding everyone of this mission, witnessing to it by a special consecration in the radicalness of the evangelical counsels, so that the whole Christian community may carry out with ever greater commitment the task that God, in Christ, has entrusted to it with the gift of his Spirit (Vita consecrata, n° 17 - 22).

The contemporary world appears particularly sensitive to the witness of those who can courageously assume the risk and responsibility of discerning the times and of the plan for building a new and more just humanity. Our time is one of great cultural and social upheaval. Thus it seems ever

more apparent that the Christian mission in the world cannot be reduced to giving a pure, simple example of honesty, competence and fidelity to duty. All this is presupposed. It is a question of putting on the mind of Jesus Christ in order to be signs of his love in the world. This is the meaning and the goal of authentic Christian secularity, and thus the purpose and value of the Christian consecration lived in Secular Institutes.

In this regard, it is all the more important that members of Secular Institutes intensely live fraternal communion within their own Institute and with the members of different Institutes.

Precisely because they are dispersed like leaven and salt in the midst of the world, they should consider themselves privileged witnesses to the value of brotherhood and Christian friendship, so necessary today, especially in the great urban areas where the majority of the world's population now lives. I hope that each Secular Institute may become this burning hearth from which many men and women can draw light and warmth for the life of the world.

BENEDICT XVI

3 February 2007

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(...) The process of your sanctification is clearly marked out: self-sacrificing adherence to the saving plan manifested in the revealed Word, solidarity with history, the search for the Lord's will inscribed in human events governed by his Providence. And at the same time, the characteristics of the secular mission are outlined: the witness to human virtues such as "righteousness and peace and joy" (Rom 14: 17), the "good conduct" of which Peter speaks in his First Letter (cf. 2: 12), echoing the Teacher's words: "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in Heaven" (Mt 5: 16).

Also part of the secular mission is the commitment to build a society that recognizes in the various environments the dignity of the person and the indispensable values for its total fulfilment: from politics to the economy, from education to the commitment to public health, from the management of services to scientific research. The aim of every specific reality proper to and lived by the Christian, his own work and his own material interests that retain their relative consistency, is found in their being embraced by the same purpose for which the Son of God came into the world. Therefore, may you feel challenged by every suffering, every injustice and every search for truth, beauty and goodness. This is not because you can come up with the solution to all problems; rather, it is because every circumstance in which human beings live and die is an opportunity for you to witness to God's saving work. This is your mission.

On the one hand, your consecration highlights the special grace that comes to you from the Spirit for the fulfilment of your vocation, and on the other, it commits you to total docility of mind, heart and will to the project of God the Father revealed in Jesus Christ, whom you have been called to follow radically. Every encounter with Christ demands a profound change of attitude, but for some, as it was for you, the Lord's request is particularly demanding: you are asked to leave everything, because God is all and will be all in your lives. It is not merely a question of a different way of relating to Christ and of expressing your attachment to him, but of an option for God that requires of you constant, absolute and total trust in him.

Conforming your own lives to the life of Christ by entering into this words, conforming your own life to the life of Christ through the practice of the evangelical counsels, is a fundamental and binding feature which, in its specificity, demands the concrete and binding commitment of “mountaineers of the spirit”, as venerable Pope Paul VI called you (26 September 1970). The secular nature of your consecration brings to the fore, on the one hand, the means you use to fulfil it, that is, the means proper to every man and woman who live in ordinary conditions in the world, and on the other, the form of its development, that is, a profound relationship with the signs of the times which you are called to discern personally and as a community in the light of the Gospel.

Your charism has been authoritatively recognized several times precisely in this discernment in order for you to be a workshop of dialogue with the world, that “experimental workshop in which the Church ascertains practical ways for

her relations with the world” (Paul VI, 6 November 1976). The enduring timeliness of your charism derives precisely from this, for this discernment must not take place from outside reality but from within it, through full involvement. This takes place in the daily relationships that you can weave in family and social relations, in professional activity, in the fabric of the civil and ecclesial communities. The encounter with Christ and the act of following him, which impels and opens people, “must necessarily be reflected “ad extra’ and expand naturally” in an encounter with one and all, for if God fulfils himself only in communion, it is also only in Trinitarian communion that human beings are fulfilled.

You are not called to establish special forms of living, of apostolic commitment or social intervention, but rather, forms that can come into being through personal relations, a source of prophetic riches. May your lives be like the yeast that leavens all the dough (cf. Mt 13: 33), sometimes silent and hidden, but always with a positive and encouraging outreach capable of generating hope. The place of your apostolate is therefore the whole human being, not only within the Christian community - where the relationship materializes in listening to the Word and in sacramental life from which you draw to sustain your baptismal identity - I say the place of your apostolate is the human being in his entirety, both within the Christian community and in the civil community, where relationships are formed in the search for the common good, in dialogue with all, called to witness to that Christian anthropology which constitutes a sensible proposal in a society bewildered and confused by its multicultural and multi-religious profile.

You come from different countries and the cultural, political and even religious situations in which you live, work

and grow old are different. In all of these situations, may you be seekers of the Truth, of the human revelation of God in life. We know it is a long journey, distressing at the present time, but its outcome is certain. Proclaim the beauty of God and of his creation.

Following Christ's example, be obedient to love, be men and women of gentleness and mercy, capable of taking to the highways of the world, doing only good. May yours be a life that is focused on the Beatitudes, that contradicts human logic to express unconditional trust in God, who wants human beings to be happy. The Church also needs you to give completeness to her mission. Be seeds of holiness scattered by the handful in the furrows of history. Rooted in the freely given and effective action with which the Lord's Spirit guides human events, may you bear fruits of genuine faith, writing with your life and your witness trajectories of hope, writing them with the actions suggested by "creativity' in charity" (John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n° 50).

BENEDICT XVI

18 July 2012

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(...) Animated by the Holy Spirit you are able to grasp the discrete and at times hidden signs of God's presence within journeying humankind. Only by virtue of grace, which is a gift of the Spirit, are you able to see the way along the often rugged and twisted pathways of human events to the fullness of overabundant life; a dynamism, which, above and beyond appearances, represents the true sense of history according to the plan of God. Your vocation is to be in the world, taking upon yourselves all burdens and yearnings with a human gaze that always coincides with the divine gaze, and is grounded in the awareness that God writes the history of salvation in the unfolding of events that take place in our history.

In this sense your identity also projects an important facet of your mission in the Church, and that is to help the Church realize its being in the world in the light of the words of Vatican Council II: "Inspired by no earthly ambition, the Church seeks but a solitary goal: to carry forward the work of Christ under the lead of the befriending Spirit. And Christ entered this world to give witness to the truth, to rescue and not to sit in judgment, to serve and not to be served" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 3). The theology of history is an important and essential aspect of the New Evangelization because the people of our time need to rediscover an overall look at the world and at time, a truly free, peaceful look (cf. Benedict XVI, 16 October 2011). The Council likewise reminds us how the relationship between the Church and the world is to be lived under the hallmark of reciprocity, whereby it is not just the Church giving

to the world, contributing to render the family of humankind and its history more human, but also the way to give to the Church, thereby enabling it to better understand itself and live its mission all the better. (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 40-45).

The work you are about to embark upon will hence concentrate on the specificity of secular consecration in the search for how secularity speaks to consecration, for just how the characteristic features of Jesus – the chaste, poor and obedient one – become constantly ‘visible’ in the midst of the world (cf. *Apostolic Exhortation Vita Consecrata*, n°1) in and through your daily life. His Holiness wishes to bring to your attention three ambits upon which to focus.

Firstly, the total donation of your life as the response to a personal and vital encounter with the love of God. You have discovered God is everything for you; you have decided to give everything to God and do so in a special way: remaining laypersons among laypersons, priests among priests. This calls for special watchfulness so your life styles may ever reveal the richness, beauty and radicality of the evangelical counsels.

Secondly, the spiritual life; an ever-present and absolutely necessary point, a sure reference for nourishing that desire to forge unity in Christ that is the underlying tension in the life of each and every Christian, and all the more so in the life of those who respond to a call for the total giving of self. The measure of the depths of your spiritual life is not the extent of your many activities, which nonetheless call for resolute commitment, but rather the ability to seek God in the heart of each event and to bring all things back to Christ. It is the “recapitulating” all things in Christ of which the Apostle Paul speaks (cf. *Eph 1:10*). Only in Christ, the Lord of history, do history and all histories take on sense and unity. Therefore, in

prayer and listening to the Word of God is this yearning to be nourished. In the celebration of the Eucharist you find the root for becoming the bread of Love broken for all. Deeply set in contemplation and in the gaze of faith enlightened by grace are to be the roots for the commitment to share with each man and woman the profound questions abiding in one and all so hope and trust may be constructed.

Thirdly, formation, which disregards no one, no matter what their age may be, because it is a matter of living one's life in fullness, educating self to that wisdom which is ever aware of human creaturehood and the greatness of the Creator. Look for contents and modes of formation that may make you laypersons and priests able to let yourselves be questioned by the complexity of the world in which we are now living, to remain open to the entreaties issuing forth from the relationship you live with the brothers and sisters you meet along the pathways of life, and to engage in a discernment of history in the light of the Word of Life. Together with the seekers of truth be prepared and willing to construct itineraries of common good neither prefabricated solutions nor fear of the questions that remain questions, but ever ready to put your life on the line with the conviction that if the kernel of grain falls upon the round and dies, it bears abundant fruit (cf. Jn 12:24).

Be creative, because the Spirit brings forth new things; nourish gazes embracing the future and roots firmly planted in Christ the Lord, so you may voice to our time as well the experience of love that lies at the very foundations of the life of each person. With charity embrace the wounds of the world and the Church. Above all, live a life which is joyful and full, receptive and forgiving because it is founded upon Jesus Christ, the definitive Word of God's Love for man.

POPE FRANCIS

to the Italian secular Institutes – 10 May 2014

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(...) May you be a sign of that Church in dialogue of which Paul VI speaks in his Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*: “Since the world cannot be saved from the outside”, he stated, “we must first of all identify ourselves with those to whom we would bring the Christian message like the Word of God who Himself became a man. Next we must forego all privilege and the use of unintelligible language, and adopt the way of life of ordinary people in all that is human and honourable. Indeed, we must adopt the way of life of the most humble people, if we wish to be listened to and understood. Then, before speaking, we must take great care to listen not only to what men say, but more especially to what they have it in their hearts to say. Only then will we understand them and respect them, and even, as far as possible, agree with them. Furthermore, if we want to be men’s pastors, fathers and teachers, we must also behave as their brothers. Dialogue thrives on friendship, and most especially on service” (n° 90-96).

(...) Your vocation makes you interested in every man and in his deeper issues which are often left unexpressed or masked. By the strength of the love of God which you have encountered and come to know, you are capable of sympathy and tenderness. Thus, you can be close enough to touch the other, his wounds and his expectations, his questions and his needs, with the tenderness that is an expression of care that erases all distances. As the Samaritan who passes by, sees and takes compassion. This is the action to which you are committed by your vocation: pass by every man and make

yourself a neighbour to every person you meet. Because your permanence in the world is not simply sociological, it is a theological reality that calls you to be aware, attentive, that can perceive, see and touch the flesh of his brother.

If this does not happen, if you are distracted, or worse still, if you do not know today's world but you know and experience only the world which suits you best or that you feel more drawn to, then conversion is urgently needed! Yours is an outward reaching vocation by nature, not only because it brings you into contact with others, but also and especially it demands that you live where every man lives. (...)

Never lose the momentum of walking the streets of the world, aware that walking, even with an uncertain step or limping along, is always better than standing still, withdrawn in your own questions or sense of security. The missionary passion, the joy of the encounter with Christ that urges you to share with others the beauty of faith, reduces the risk of becoming stuck in individualism. The line of thought that proposes man as self-reliant, guided only by his own choices and desires, often vested in the seemingly beautiful garment of freedom and respect, threatens to undermine the foundations of consecrated life, especially of lay people. There is an urgent need to reevaluate your sense of belonging to your vocational community which, precisely because it is founded on community life, finds its strengths in its charisma. For this reason, if each of you are a precious opportunity for others to meet with God, it is about rediscovering the responsibility of being prophetic as a community, to seek together, with humility and patience, a word of sense that can be a gift for the country and for the Church, and to bear witness to it with simplicity. You are like antennas ready to receive the smallest

innovations prompted by the Holy Spirit, and you can help the ecclesial community to take on this gaze of goodness and find new and bold ways to reach all peoples.

Poor among the poor, but with a burning heart. Never still, always on the move. Together and sent out, even when you are alone, because your consecration makes of you a living spark of the Church. Always on the road borne along by the virtue that is of pilgrims: joy!

CMIS - Conferenza Mondiale Istituti Secolari
Roma, 21-25 Agosto 2016