

### 1. An initial question

Dedicating time to talk about formation to secularity assumes that you desire to be formed to secularity. Is it so? Are we looking for this formation? Are we interested? Our answer is but obvious.

Just as it is not sufficient in consecrated life to live a Christian life and have a general purpose to consecrate oneself, but is necessary to feel affection and attraction for God, the same for consecrated secular life it is not sufficient to have a general purpose to live a consecration in the world, but it is necessary to feel affection and attraction for the world.

As Pope Francis told us (in a talk which should be our reference) this attraction, at least partly, in the secular institutes has been extinguished.

*If this (your being conscious and devoted in the world) does not happen, if you are distracted, or worse still you do not know this contemporary world but you know and are part only of the world which makes you more comfortable or which entices you, then, a conversion is very urgently required!*

*(To the participants of the meeting promoted by the Italian Conference of Secular Institutes, 10th May 2014).*

Therefore, it is right to take up some words of Pope Paul VI addressed to the Secular Institutes, exactly 40 years back:

*If the Secular Institutes remain faithful to their own vocation, they will almost become “the experimental laboratory” (Paul VI, 25th August, 1976).*

What did Paul VI, want to tell us, when he said, “If they remain faithful?”

I hope that this Assembly may express courageously regarding the necessity to regain this fidelity, deceived a little (i prefer the term “fidelity” instead of identity, which risks to stiffen some features).

### 2. An important starting point

It is necessary to ask another question: can you ‘add’ secularity in the profile of a person included in our journey or is a prerequisite necessary? In other words, the secular characteristics in our vocational form can begin from zero or is it necessary to acknowledge a starting point?

I feel that, even though we can speak about formation to secularity, the latter should be a starting point. Therefore an initial discernment of every vocation is necessary; and such discernment should be courageous. As Pope Francis told us during the Year for Consecrated Life, one must even know to say NO, so that our Institutes do not go astray from their own nature. This vocational discernment cannot stop us from verifying the existence of a Will to live as consecrated in the world. It is necessary to have interest and passion for what is lived in the world. Even more, it is necessary to live in the world, that is drawn by events and activities which are food for our human and spiritual life.

Discernment should be able to recognize these traits:

- Love for multiple expressions that exist in the world, in terms of choices, opinions, feelings, etc. You should not try to look for or express any uniformity of thoughts or behaviours.
- Love for the world allows you to accept even its defects, in a genuine Christian sense of a merciful gaze, full of comprehension for all the different things that lead to assume a position or lead a wrong life.
- A profound humanity, which means the capacity to find a common human ground with everyone.

- A strong faith in the dimension of the Kingdom, for its small, weak, hidden nature, but which overcomes the reality of the Church because it embraces the plan of God, which reaches everyone and everything. This implies, according to the teachings of the Fathers of the Church, a passion for the seeds of the Word, namely, for the seeds of truth scattered everywhere in the human history. This also involves feeling comfortable so to say with the non believing world. All that is mentioned above can be summarized in one single concept and that is the positive openness towards all relationships, knowing that these are not principally chosen, but which are imposed by life and therefore to be welcomed as they present themselves.

### **3. Formation in secularity**

Before starting with the formation of secularity it is important to say that the formation should occur in secularity, that is, it must be considerate about the conditions of the person's life who is in formation.

The formation should take place where the person lives, avoiding transfers, even if temporary or in different contexts; he should therefore situate in language and culture of that person.

For this reason, the formator is called to travel geographically as well as culturally, without predefined formation methods, carrying a light weight luggage only the bare necessary things, You learn to say it in the words of St. Paul, to be a Jew with the Jews, pagan with pagans, weak with the weak, everything to everyone.

Concretely, this kind of attention leads you to other choices: for example, not necessarily the meetings which will be held in the religious houses; the language will help you adapt being an instrument of communication rather than of separation, etc.

### **4. Formation to secularity**

After all these premises, which were however necessary, it is now possible to speak about the content for the formation to secularity.

The first step should be the thorough knowledge of the Holy Bible, with an attention that it should be taken wholly and not only through a few selected passages, those which will fill our hearts with good sentiments. This kind of a selection of texts gives us a deformed image of Scripture and therefore of the Word of God that it contains.

In this reference, I like to remember the example of Abram. We know of his story, some symbolic pages, starting from the call in Genesis chapter 12. It would be important also to know the events of chapter 11, where it is spoken about Terah and his three sons, where one dies soon in his father's presence while about the other nothing is known. Abram then follows father Terah refugee in Canaan, where Terah dies. Abram finds himself in exile in a foreign land, orphan, alone and with a barren wife. This is the beginning of the salvation history. A more desperate and marginalized situation cannot be imagined; but this is God's way of doing it, which you learn to know through your fragility and smallness.

At the same time it is important to see how much effort it took Abram before believing in the promises of the Lord of the numerous descendants (promise that he does not see manifested in his life): first, in Egypt, surrenders his wife Sara to Pharaoh, then it seems he identifies his nephew Lot as one of his possible descendants, finally searches the son of his slave. The greatness of Abram is seen in having continued to walk in faith, even amidst difficulties and doubts: God met real men, whose stories cannot be idealized.

Therefore it is important to be familiar with the Scriptures so as to be familiar with God's ways of acting in the world, especially in our secular history, which became more sacred after the coming of Jesus.

Looking at Genesis and all the events in the Bible you will know the value of creation and the intention which gives it life. Especially, it includes the autonomy of the created reality: God creates everything and gives life to it, he lets it live in its own consistency. This is essential to understand our vocation, just as it is important to understand that the first way to recognize us as brothers with

every man on this earth is to find ourselves sharing the most common and same command to cultivate and safeguard the garden: every man, even if he is unconsciously responding to this command of God.

In regards to this, the words of a theologian Theobald addressed to the secular institutes can help us, where he reminds us that our vocation, more than being at the service of Christian vocation, should be at the service of human vocation. Even the teachings of the Fathers of the Church help us, which say that they too first reflected on the significance of the human events after the coming of Jesus.

The formation of secularity should then analyze even contents of dialogue, meaning and methods of cultural mediation, relating it to the Christian culture and cultures; it should teach us to distinguish the human plan and the divine plan without separating nor overpowering either of them, in order to work authentically and not falsely towards a common goal for all, without ever renouncing ones faith. It should even teach to develop autonomy of justice, essential for our vocation which does not take away our personal responsibility of acting in the world.

## **5. Formation by secularity**

After have spoken of formation in and of secularity, it is necessary – and maybe it is the most important step – that one is formed by secularity, that is by life. This concretely signifies, my way of thinking, speaking and of acting which changes because of me staying and working in the world. The vows themselves, in their concrete way are conditioned by secularity. One learns to live the evangelical counsels starting from what happens to us. For example, an injustice at our work place can immediately teach us how to live poverty and obedience much more than the other rules.

In a broader sense, all that happens teaches us a way to translate the Gospel into life concretely.

In this way, even amidst difficulties we can discover with respect and admiration, that when human action is seen as human development it is also in harmony with us feeling Christian.

“All truth, by whomsoever it may be said, comes from the Holy Spirit”: these words of St. Thomas should become a guideline for our vocation; we should thus develop a special sensibility to react to the Holy Spirit, to be ready to recognize him anywhere, especially there, where we may least expect him. This allows us to have a great trust in life, just the way it appears, because life already contains in itself a plea calling us to hand over ourselves to life itself. The incessant work of the Holy Spirit assures us that surrendering ourselves to life means surrendering ourselves to God.