

# PLURALISM AMONGST SECULAR INSTITUTES

By GIUSEPPE LAZZATI

ONE OF THE resolutions unanimously adopted at the first World Congress of Secular Institutes last September concerned the pluralism of secular Institutes. It was taken in response to the universal desire to safeguard the original inspiration, the charism, of the individual Institute. The idea was not, of course, to include under the term secular Institute various fundamentally different states of life; but simply to indicate that it does have a precise meaning which clearly demarcates a specific kind of life approved by the Church.

The advantages of investigating the limits of this pluralism are obvious enough.<sup>1</sup> There is in actual fact a great variety of forms which correspond to the canonical descriptions of the secular Institute.<sup>2</sup> Further, there are today canonically established secular Institutes which no longer wish to be considered as such, because present-day norms no longer seem to correspond to their original inspiration. The particular way of life that an Institute represents, its specific characteristic, depends on the charism of the founder – his endowment by the holy Spirit for the establishment in the Church of a new form of christian life, a particularization of the universal call to holiness. It is this spiritual endowment which determines a particular form of life and its essential elements, whilst many other elements are external, accidental and ephemeral. It is clear, for instance, and today more than ever before, that ‘it’s not the cowl that makes the monk’, nor could one describe a lay vocation by the mere absence of external signs. We must look first, then, for the es-

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<sup>1</sup> For religious as well as for secular Institutes. Some religious, in their search for new freedoms, are engaging in a process of secularization which, they feel, is bringing them very close to the form of consecrated life proper to secular Institutes.

<sup>2</sup> The relevant documents are: 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* of 19 March, 1948. Only in *Primo Feliciter* is there any attempt to be precise about the meaning of secularity, which is stated to be the *raison d'être* of the secular Institutes, conditioning their whole being and operation.

sential element, without which a secular Institute cannot exist as such, even though there may be present other elements which do belong to the make-up of such an Institute.

The common opinion is that this element is to be found in the relationship between consecration and secularity or worldliness.<sup>3</sup> But we must be clear about the meaning of this statement. Otherwise we will lapse once more into a vagueness which would defeat our attempt at definition, in the strict sense of marking out the exact boundaries; remembering in our case that canonical definition depends on spiritual demarcation.

The purpose of the Motu Proprio *Primo Feliciter*, was, it seems certain, to clarify the notion of secularity, which was accepted as the specific characteristic of the secular Institutes and the expression of their entire *raison d'être*. In what has become a famous phrase, this document stated that the apostolate of the secular Institutes 'must not only be carried out faithfully in the world, but also, as it were, from the world's midst; and for that reason it must avail itself of the professions, methods, forms, places and circumstances which correspond to this condition of worldliness'. (*Non tantum in saeculo sed veluti ex saeculo, ac proinde professionibus, exercitiis, formis, locis, rerum adiunctis saeculari huic conditioni respondentibus, exercendus est fideliter.*) This text itself needs clarification, which can be achieved by going back to what is certainly its source. At the same time, we must remember that texts such as these, which attempt to express the power of the holy Spirit's gift, contain a depth of meaning which only life itself can reveal; so that any interpretation which fails to take account of the historical development of any life-form in the Church is bound to be defective.

The source of the text is, beyond all doubt, the report prepared by Fr A. Gemelli O.F.M. on 'Secularity and the Consecrated Life' presented to the Holy See in 1939:

The characteristic element of the forms of life under consideration has no parallel either in the religious state strictly understood or in the quasi-religious state treated in canons 673 and following of the code of canon law. It consists in this, that the objective and programme of those consecrated in these Institutes is *the service of God in the world*. The members of a religious or quasi-religious association are dedicated to promoting Christ's Kingdom in the world by prayer and

<sup>3</sup> This was the general opinion at the Congress, attended by almost all the approved secular Institutes.

action; they *work on the world but from outside the world*. Whereas the member of the secular Institute, though he consecrates himself wholly and with equal zeal to the same end, *works on the world from within the world*, so to speak. No doubt this formula is a very imperfect one, but it is perhaps more adequate than most for expressing a real but extremely complex antithesis; one, moreover, which is still being worked out in practice.<sup>4</sup>

Here then is the original source of the formula, *Non tantum in saeculo sed veluti ex saeculo*. Its author states frankly that it is by no means a perfect formulation; but he does insist that it expresses 'the most characteristic, and, at the same time, the most revolutionary aspect of the new ways of life'. It is because of this that 'associations of this type, as opposed to religious or quasi-religious associations, cannot have clerics, at least among their effective members, but only laity'. The last thirty years has seen the living out in practice of the antithesis mentioned by Fr Gemelli. In particular, the notion of secularity has become more precise through experience and reflection. Special attention has been given to it in certain well-known conciliar texts, particularly with reference to the role of the laity in the Church:

The secular character is proper and special to laity . . . by their very vocation, the laity seek the kingdom of God by dealing with temporal realities and setting them to rights according to the divine plan. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God, so that, by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the gospel, they can *work for the sanctification of the world from within*, in the manner of leaven. In this way they can make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope, and charity. The layman is closely involved in temporal affairs of every sort. It is therefore his special task to illumine and organize these affairs in such a way that they may always start out, develop and persist according to Christ's mind, to the praise of the creator and the redeemer.<sup>5</sup>

Texts such as these point up the problem of secular Institutes for priests. I am becoming more and more convinced that if we do have to speak of secularity with reference to priests, the term cannot have

<sup>4</sup> This report has been published in *Secolarità e vita consecrata* (Rome, 1966), pp 360-442.

<sup>5</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 31.

the same meaning as when it is applied to the laity. I have no doubt of the good that can be done, and is in fact being done, by Institutes for priests which aim at fostering a spirit and a way of life based on evangelical charity; yet I am sure that it would be better to find for these Institutes a name more suited to their nature than that of secular Institutes.<sup>6</sup>

We are now in a position to consider what precise meaning must be given to the formula used for specifying secularity, taking into account the origins of the expression and all that reflection and experience have contributed since 1939. It is understandable that the formula, for some, should have been applied in a purely tactical sense: that is, the realities and conditions of the world (*saeculum*) have been made so many occasions for an apostolate consisting of a more advanced form of evangelization (especially when the very notion of apostolate comes to be accepted as synonymous with evangelization). It is also understandable that Institutes which are properly defined as apostolic, and who have some directly apostolic work of an advanced or pioneering type to which their members dedicate the whole or part of their time, should think that all this exhausts the meaning not only of the *in saeculo* (in the world) but also of the *veluti ex saeculo* (from the world's midst) – to use the phrase expressing what is truly original in the formula. The *in saeculo* applies, in fact, to all Christians, priests and religious included. The Church is in the world for the salvation of the world; nor can we conceive of a vocation in the Church that is not directed to the salvation of the world.<sup>7</sup> If the phrase *veluti ex saeculo* were taken in the

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<sup>6</sup> It is obvious that priests need to understand the problems of the laity in order the better to carry out their priestly ministry; and this will demand an open and honest dialogue with the laity in general and in particular with consecrated lay persons living in secular Institutes. However, it seems to me that the citation we have given from *Lumen Gentium* remains fundamental. After the clear and precise statement about the secular character proper and special to laity, the conciliar text continues: 'It is true that those in holy orders can at times engage in secular activities, and even have a secular profession. But by reason of their particular vocation they are chiefly and professedly ordained to the sacred ministry. Similarly, by their state in life, religious give splendid and striking testimony that the world cannot be transfigured and offered to God without the spirit of the beatitudes'. The priest, then, is never defined by secularity. Nor do I believe it makes sense to speak, as some do today, of secular Institutes for priests in the context of associations of priests specializing in the guidance of the laity. But this is another issue altogether.

<sup>7</sup> When we speak of the salvation of the world, we mean its liberation from sin and its offering to God according to the end for which it is created and to which the Redeemer seeks to restore it. As *Lumen Gentium* insists, this salvation is worked out under God by the whole Church: that is, the pope, the college of the bishops *in toto* and in its individual

tactical sense already referred to, as a sort of dropping by parachute among the enemy lines, it could hardly have become the accepted expression to describe the essential element which conditions this new way of life, in its spiritual, structural and juridical aspects. In fact, such a tactical interpretation of the phrase would not detract in any way from that being 'outside' the world which the other phrase *in saeculo* involves: 'being outside', that is, the actual building of the world; yet that is the very reason why the layman should remain in the world.

Fr Gemelli saw in this phrase 'from the world's midst' more than the conditioning element of the life of the secular Institute. The expression is also creative of the vision of the Church as the *sacramentum renovationis totius mundi*, the mystery of the world's renewal. Clearly, it is through the Church that men are to be saved by being liberated from the slavery of sin. And more than this: the world is to be saved through its own constituent realities, once these have been liberated, through the Church, from the whims of sinful man and set to rights according to the will of God; so that these realities are no longer obstacles, but positive helps to man in his journey to God. It is such a vision that the phrase 'from the world's midst' conjures up. It expresses the condition, the task of anyone, the ordinary man, and, in the Church, the layman or secular who feels himself called both by his own natural situation and by his mission to build up the world in every aspect of its reality – social, economic, political and cultural. Whoever accepts this vocation can draw inspiration and strength from this truly christian task of bringing together natural and supernatural principles and values. This is, in fact, the condition, the pledge, of all the baptized who, lacking any further call, are willing to be faithful to this first vocation. The secular character of this call is constituted by 'dealing with temporal realities and setting them to rights in accordance with the divine plan'. Here is revealed the full meaning of secularity as such; one that is applicable only to the laity. It involves the most far-reaching consequences in mentality and conduct: in a word, of life-style. We said earlier

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members, priests, religious and laity. There are certain aspects of this task which are common to all the members, others which are the speciality of the various groups. For example, every christian has the task of announcing the gospel, but the pope and the bishops have the duty to announce it with that authentic *magisterium* which carries with it special guarantees. The laity, however, must live it in the very act of building and transforming the world, using the gospel as the ferment; and this is the nature of their commitment.

that what specifies the secular Institute as such is the relationship between secularity (in the sense in which we have been describing it) and consecration. This relationship is such that we can speak in real and substantial terms of *secular* consecration: of a consecration, that is, which enriches worldliness with all the values characteristic of God's grace, whilst accepting the limitations imposed on it by secularity; and this is what distinguishes it from other forms of consecration. We must notice however, that these limitations do not reduce to nothing (or almost to nothing) the obligations involved in consecration; rather they enhance them.<sup>8</sup> Nor is it true that the limitations imposed on consecration by secularity tend to hand over these obligations to the responsibility of the individual, without the mediating presence of a leader (*responsabile*); for this mediation is essential for every community that wants to be in the Church and to imitate its forms.<sup>9</sup>

If this dynamic interaction between secularity and consecration is the first and indispensable condition for the existence of a secular Institute, there are other necessary elements also. These seem to me to be reducible to three: explicit apostolic orientation, communion of life, and approval by the Church either at pontifical or diocesan level. This third element does not allow of pluralism; whereas the others do, as long as there is no opposition to the first and radically defining element of the secular Institutes. Pluralism, diversity amongst the various kinds of secular Institutes, has to do with explicit apostolic goals and with communion of life.

Does explicit apostolic orientation demand 'works'? Or alternatively, when it has the secular character, does it exclude works? In the first period of the existence of the secular Institutes a positive answer to the first question was almost taken for granted. This was the period when the Institutes were conceived 'tactically', as advanced forms of a service of evangelization. Not a few of the Institutes came to birth with precise objectives such as this and with hardly any preoccupation with true secularity. During the period of evolution, the process of settling down, there was a gradual reversal in thinking, not because the essential apostolic orientation was lost

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<sup>8</sup> One cannot help feeling that certain religious mistakenly confuse the secularity which they believe will 'update' their Institutes with this reduction of the obligations involved in consecration.

<sup>9</sup> No matter how successfully secularity distinguishes the life of the secular Institute from the religious, this mediating function can never be suppressed. The point is very carefully elucidated in Fr Martelet's article, cf *supra*, pp 58 ff.

sight of, but because of the developing understanding that apostolate and secularity were intrinsically linked. Thus the apostolate came to be seen primarily as the christian inspiration of temporal realities and through this inspiration as evangelization. The obligation of a personal presence from within the world has won the day over the operation organized for action upon the world (the works). So today it is said that the apostolic orientation of a secular Institute, though it must be clearly expressed and lived, does not require that the Institute have its own particular works, and may even go so far as to urge the Institute not to have them by preference.

Are Institute 'works', as such, therefore excluded? I think not, provided that the 'works' do not lead the Institute to forget the true meaning of secularity, and as long as they are carried out in a way that accords with this meaning. It is clear, for instance, that where the work of evangelization would so absorb the aim and will of an Institute that the members would be led to forget or to depreciate their primary obligation to carry over into the realm of secular responsibility the virtues typical of secular Institutes, then such an Institute would have merely the name and not the reality of the secular Institute. However, there are special cases, as when a particular work does not represent the main apostolic drive of the Institute, but is something additional: particularly if such a work can draw from the total secular consecration qualities typical of a work of evangelization carried out by the laity. In fact, any apostolic work in the secular field, as long as it respects that fundamental requirement of secularity – of being completely at one with the effort to build up the world in actual fact, can be compatible with the nature of a secular Institute. It is merely a question of suitability. With regard to the element which we have called communion of life, it is the commonly held opinion, and one borne out in practice, that a deeper understanding of secularity calls for a diffused rather than a collective form of presence in community, whether this term is understood in its canonical sense or not. Secular Institutes obviously do not demand community living; nor do they exclude it absolutely, but only if it is an obstacle to a true secularity. That is, only those forms of life in common incompatible with the demands of a life of full secular commitment are unacceptable.

It is clear, then, that once we safeguard the first element, which specifies the essential life of the secular Institute, it is possible to admit a certain variety of forms which derive from the different ways in which the Institutes approach the fulness of secular commit-

ment; and this will be particularly true of the various qualities which go to make the spiritual endowment, the charism, associated with the founder of the individual Institute.

In conclusion, we may say that, once the essential element which differentiates secular consecration from all other kinds of consecrated life in the Church is clearly defined, there will always be a choice amongst the remaining elements, which, under the influence of the Spirit and to enrich the Church in all the ways that harmonize with her needs, will result in a real pluralism amongst secular Institutes.

Contributors to Supplement 13 (see p 61)

**Edward Malatesta, S.J.**, currently lecturing on the Theology of St John at the Gregorian University, writes on *Consecration for Mission*.

**Barnabas M. Ahern, C.P.**, contributes *Ambassadors for Christ*, a study of Pauline teaching on the apostolate.

**Caritas McCarthy, S.H.C.J., Ph.D.**, directress of her Congregation's historical institute, considers the origins of apostolic religious life, and its chequered history in the Church.

**Clarence Gallagher, S.J.**, canon lawyer and lecturer in Ecclesiology at Heythrop College, London University, examines the current controversy on the 'double function' of the modern priest and apostolic religious.

**Peter Hebblethwaite, S.J.**, editor of *The Month* and of the forthcoming 2nd english edition of *The Documents of Vatican II*, considers present apostolic trends in the light of *The Signs of the Times*.

**Michael Ivens, S.J.**, and **James Walsh, S.J.**, write respectively on *Ministry and Secularity* and *Apostolic Prayer*.

**Jean Beyer, S.J.**, gives an authoritative comment on the new proposals for the revision of Canon Law on the *Life of Perfection*.