

THE SECULAR INSTITUTES: THEIR UNIVERSAL RELEVANCE

IT IS thirteen years since the associations officially known as "Secular Institutes"¹ became a part of the life of the Church. They are associations of the faithful, consisting of secular priests, or laymen,² or lay women, who bind themselves permanently to the pursuit of the goal of the Christian life—perfect charity—by means of vows, or an equivalent self-engagement of a serious nature.³ But whereas the previously recognized "states of perfection", i.e. (a) that of the religious Orders and Congregations, and (b) that of the Societies of the Common Life, have always spoken of "leaving the world" in order to live the Christian life perfectly, the *Secular Institutes*, as their title implies, deliberately remain *in the world*, in order to do the very same thing. This is the essential difference between their way of life and the Religious Life.

There are also a number of minor differentiations. One of them, but it is precisely of the sort that looms large in popular imagination and produces much misunderstanding, is the fact that, generally speaking, religious are distinguishable from ordinary Catholics, and up to a point from one another, by the wearing of distinctive, uniform dress—the religious habit. Normally, Secular Institutes have no special habit, and thus "look like everybody else".⁴ An analogous difference is that the

¹ About fifty have received pontifical or episcopal approval; many similar groups are in process of being approved. Descriptive lists of all these associations with attempts to classify them may be seen in Jean Beyer, s.j., *Les Instituts Séculiers* (Louvain, 1954), pp. 367–402; Dom Robert Lemoine, o.s.b., *Le Droit des Religieux du Concile de Trente aux Instituts Séculiers*, *Museum Lessianum* (1956), pp. 546–73; *Les Instituts Séculiers dans l'Église. Doctrines et réalisations actuelles* (Bonne Presse, Paris), 1959. The fullest and most systematic is that of N. Gil, c.m.f., which has been appearing since 1958 in the *Commentarium pro Religiosis, De Institutis Saecularibus hucusque approbatis* (aa. 1947–1956), 37 (1958), 69–79, 181–93, 317–22; 38 (1959); 69–78; 39 (1960), 101–6.

² Some Institutes are composite, with sections for priests, laymen and women, and some male Institutes admit a certain number of priests, e.g. the *Opus Dei*.

³ Some Institutes take three vows, of poverty, chastity and obedience; some, not all of these; but there is always a serious *donation, oblation*, etc., which is of equal force. There has been a considerable discussion about the nature of their vows, whether public or merely private, or possibly, of some new, intermediate kind.

⁴ They often wear some inconspicuous badge or sign; some have a special 'choir dress', and some a professional uniform, but there is no characteristic 'habit'.

religious usually lives in a community, which is housed in an establishment of monastic, conventual, or collegiate type. Members of Secular Institutes do not necessarily, or even usually, live in community, though they must have at least one common centre for purposes of government and administration and for the formation and intermittent community living of their members. It is quite normal for the majority of these to live in isolation, in their own homes or lodgings; even their common centres, however large and efficiently organized, and frequently possessing a semi-public oratory, are not monasteries or convents. These are not the only distinctions between the older states of perfection and this newer one, but on the whole they are the differences which cause most confusion, barring the way to a correct appreciation of this new mode of Christian life.

Over a dozen years of full recognition by the Holy See, and yet the movement is still *new*, and in a sense has to be presented as something new. The basic possibility of such a pattern of life, however, is exceedingly old, and a remark of Harnack's on the many-sidedness of Christianity itself may, not inappropriately, be adapted to this context. After enumerating a number of elements in early Christianity, any one of which, he alleges, "seemed to be the principal, if not the only one", he adds, as yet another of these, "the news of the birth of a new people, who for all that, have hiddenly existed from the beginning of things".¹

This "hiddenly" existing way of life is, indeed, very ancient, and is also persistently recurrent in the annals of Christian sanctity. In modern times, however, what may be termed a "movement towards the Secular Institutes" is perhaps most clearly discernible in the life and writings of the heroic and saintly Jesuit, Fr Pierre Joseph Picot de Clorivière. A survivor of the suppressed Society, he established, at the height of the French Revolutionary Terror in the last decade of the eighteenth century, the Society of the Sacred Heart and the Society of the Daughters of Mary. Both, after various vicissitudes, still exist, the former as the premier Secular Institute for diocesan

¹ Cf. *The Mission and the Expansion of Christianity*, Vol. I, ii, epilogue, cited by Donald Attwater, *St John Chrysostom* (London, 1959), pp. 22–3.

priests, and the latter in the form of a congregation of religious sisters.¹ The movement, so clearly delineated in his correspondence and the rules for his two societies, gathered force during the period of the modern Catholic Revival, and became, particularly under the pontificates of Pius XI and Pius XII, a movement towards the canonical recognition of the status and organization of Secular Institutes. Both these Popes took a deep personal interest in this matter,² but it was Pius XII who, in his Encyclical *Provida Mater Ecclesiae* of 2 February 1947, accorded them recognition and formulated a *lex peculiaris* to be the basis of all such foundations. A year later he hailed the new way of life with enthusiasm and gratitude in his Motu Proprio, *Primo feliciter*.³ These new apostolic auxiliaries of the clergy are frankly welcomed by the Pontiff, and their organizations praised as "unrivalled forms of confederation" (*Provida Mater*), and "truly providential" (*Primo feliciter*). They are clearly distinguished from, yet in many ways assimilated to, the existing Religious Institutes. In presenting the Church with this new "state of perfection" the Pope repeatedly emphasizes their "secularity", for, he says, "in this lies the whole reason for the existence of such Institutes . . . [their] perfection is to be exercised and professed in the world; and consequently must be adapted to secular life", and their apostolate too "is to be faithfully exercised not only *in the world*, but as originating *from the world*".⁴

The growth of the Secular Institutes, especially since 1947, has been truly phenomenal. The number of recognized groups, or groups in various stages of formation, the number of vocations, particularly to the more highly and internationally organized Institutes, is equally striking. So is their geographical distribution; most countries have now received or even originated such groups. Their members are to be found everywhere, at home or in the foreign missions, applying themselves to every sort of apostolic work. In some localities their functioning

¹ Beyer, *op. cit.*, 35-50. Cf. also Henri Monier-Vinard, S.J., *Clarivière* in *Dict. de Spiritualité*, Vol. II, 1 (Paris, 1953), coll. 974-9.

² Beyer, *op. cit.*, pp. 64 ff.

³ English versions of the documents can be seen in *Secular Institutes (A Symposium)* (Blackfriars, 1952), pp. 41-65.

⁴ *Primo feliciter* II, cf. *Secular Institutes*, pp. 55-6.

seems to be taken by everybody as a matter of course. This, however, is by no means true of Great Britain and Ireland, where their impact up to the present has been very limited. There is still a widespread lack of knowledge concerning them. There is not only lack of real knowledge, but a great many inaccurate notions, leading, at least in some quarters, to lack of understanding about their aims and a consequent lack of sympathy. There are, actually, ten or more groups, known to me, who certainly belong to the general current of ideas and aspirations. Of these, three fully approved Institutes appear as such in the *Catholic Directory*—the *Opus Dei*, *Teresianas* and the *Ladies of Nazareth* (more usually known as *The Grail*). One which is pontifically approved does not: it is the *Union Caritas Christi*.¹ But our Catholic public hears little of these efforts that are going on in their midst, and the Institutes remain unknown, and sometimes misunderstood, even by the clergy and religious. Only a minority of the latter are likely to encounter the Institutes in the course of their pastoral work, and then only because their own missionary endeavours and those of the Institutes happen to meet. It is easy to know some of them through such activities, and still not to know them at all as a "state of perfection", with all that this entails. Unfortunately, many of the more immediately obvious ways in which the Institutes might seek to dispel "the cloud of unknowing" which envelops them, are also the ways which, instead of lessening, might even increase, inaccurate conceptions about their real essence and aims.²

The initial and most urgent step towards a real apprecia-

¹ The other groups, about which I am prepared to furnish information if required, are mainly for women, and nearly all connected with a religious Order; Benedictine (Oblates), Dominican (Third Order), Franciscan (Third Order), Carmelite, Servite, Our Lady of Hospitality, Compagnia di San Paolo, etc. Incidentally, I know of a number of priests who are interested either in the movement generally or in Institutes for Diocesan Priests in particular. It might be a good idea to put these priests in touch with one another. Might it not be well also to commemorate the late Pope, His Holiness Pius XII, by the formation of a small, informal society of those interested in these matters?

² Although some part in the apostolate is essential to their status, not all engage in external activities of the apostolate, or not to the same extent. There are some which may be almost entirely contemplative. Most ways of publicity tend to divert attention to outward manifestations; the more colourful and picturesque they are the better. It is difficult to shout, sing or mime the interior desire of perfection; as it proved difficult to dramatize the interior struggle of obedience.

tion of what these societies are, as distinct from the thrilling and useful things that some of them sometimes do, would appear to be the realization that they are not simply an interesting, yet accidental and perhaps transient, development in the Church, but, on the contrary, one that is essential, providential, and universally relevant. Almighty God Himself has brought this development about in His infinitely loving benevolence towards all His children.

Most Catholics would probably be prepared to admit that an event such as the enthusiasm for monastic asceticism awakened by St Athanasius' *Life of Antony* was a major and providential turning-point in the growth of Christian civilization. The coming of the friars in the thirteenth century, or of the sons of St Ignatius Loyola in the sixteenth, surely deserves to rank in the same way. On the same plane, the gradual working out of the pattern of the Secular Institutes and their emergence in 1947 is to be viewed as just such another milestone in the long journey of the Church of Christ towards the Parousia. There can hardly be great presumption in thinking that, when future historians look back at our times with objective detachment, they will stress the multiple importance of the pontificate of Pius XII, and single out in it the *Provida Mater* of 1947 as a truly epoch-making date in the spiritual as well as in the juridical history of the Church.

The supreme significance of this new way of life to those men and women who sincerely believe that God has given them the vocation to live it need not be laboured. But the rest of the Church may not safely be allowed to regard such calls as religious or priestly vocations which have somehow gone wrong, or which cannot be fulfilled save in a diluted or mitigated form.¹ Nor must they be considered as passing and exceptional solutions, by way of concession, to the special difficulties of our times. On the contrary, we must come to acknowledge this vocation as something existing in its own right, an approved modality of that perfection towards which all Christians must tend; in the past it has produced the well-nigh in-

¹ Admittedly, there are expressions in the *Provida Mater* which, if read in isolation, might seem to countenance the view of the Secular Institutes being a kind of "second-best choice". Cf. *Sec. Inst.*, pp. 46 ff. But the whole of the document and still more the whole of *Primo feliciter* renders such a view inadmissible.

numerable variants of the religious life and, in our time, the dedicated life of Secular Institutes.

A frank, welcoming attitude to these new recruits for perfection in the world, and a cordial "helping hand" to this new missionary "militia", such as was exemplified by the late Pope and by so many great bishops and priests of our day,¹ if widely spread throughout the clergy and laity, would be much, but not enough. Admiring appreciation of the generosity which now drives some souls into Secular Institutes, as it has ever driven others into the desert or the cloister, to the foreign mission-field or the leper colony, would be more, but still not enough. For all this is no more than an appreciation of the value of the Institutes for *them*—for those called to them—rather than for *us*, all of us, without exception. The universal—that is, *Catholic*—relevance of this way of life will be fully apparent only when it comes to be incorporated in ordinary pastoral preaching, as part of the supremely important lesson that the call to perfection is both universally possible and universally obligatory. It is no paradox to say that priests, secular and regular, can and should derive from an attentive consideration of this vocation a fresh incentive to love and cherish their own, as well as a new manner of inspiring their flocks. Religious too, whilst contemplating in the Secular Institutes a God-given vocation which is markedly different from their own, should be induced to trace the common origin of both ways right back to the Gospel, and so combine a liberal admiration for what is new with a rediscovery and a re-invigoration of their own more ancient calling. As for the laity, those countless Christians who remain, perhaps deliberately and at the call of grace, outside all these special vocations, but who all the same are signed with baptism and "called to be saints", surely they more readily still are likely to be thrilled to hear of this timely new witness to the high ideals of their Christian profession, rendered by men and women who so closely resemble them in all the ordinary conditions of living.

The validity of this contention—that the Secular Institutes are a providential intervention to re-enliven spirituality at *all* levels—may perhaps best be shown by sketching the sort of

¹ *Primo feliciter*, VI, 1, in *Sec. Inst.*, pp. 56, 57-8.

change, in each case revolutionary, that their advent has brought about in three characteristic fields of Catholic activity and ecclesiastical studies, namely, Canon Law, the history of the Church, and the doctrinal presentation of the spiritual life. The change is fairly described as revolutionary, because, in each field, the advent of the Secular Institutes imposes a patient re-examination, and an honest re-evaluation of the familiar data. Even if it were argued that a failure to incorporate this new factor into our Christian *Weltanschauung* would not necessarily result in its total disintegration, it would still be true that it would narrow our views, instead of opening up broader vistas of true Christian freedom.

First, the approval of the Secular Institutes signifies a real revolution in the Canon Law of the Church and in the ways of canonical thinking. This evidently concerns canonists, but does it, to any great extent, concern anybody else? Does it concern the priest in his pastoral work, or Christians endeavouring to keep the faith in a not very helpful world?

Anyone who is not convinced of the revolutionary character of what has happened would do well to ponder the weighty and interesting, and at times amusing, treatise of Dom Robert Lemoine on the evolution of the laws affecting religious life from the Council of Trent "until the Secular Institutes".¹ In it may be read, among other things, of the long, tortuous journey travelled by the Societies of Common Life to obtain recognition of their vows as *religious* vows, and themselves as *religious*. The outcome of that journey was by no means a foregone conclusion, nor was it reached without many great sacrifices. In comparison, the attainment of canonical status by the Secular Institutes was not nearly so chequered; it was also rapid, and very thoroughgoing—in a word—revolutionary. The same authority also brings out the truth of Harnack's remark which we have ventured to adapt to the Secular Institutes—the latent presence of this "new people" long before they emerged into the canonical light of day. The characteristic aims and ideas, and often the very methods, of the Secular Institutes were conceived, time and time again, by spiritually minded persons, but for a variety of reasons were found not yet viable. Frequently

¹ Cf. note (1), p. 281.

the founders of religious institutes have had to sacrifice their full vision and accept merely what was deemed practicable in the then existing state of society and the Church. One prominent example of this was the recurrent problem about the part women might play in an active apostolate without the traditional safeguards of cloister, grille, and habit. Shall we not say that the great founder-saints sowed indeed in good ground, but had to wait for modern times in order to see the harvesting of the promised hundredfold?

The second part of the *Provida Mater* is the new *lex peculiaris* for the Secular Institutes; it was lacking in the Code, and hence in the commentaries and manuals of Canon Law used in seminaries. Priests, therefore, who completed their studies before 1947 and have not been specially "alerted", e.g. by the cropping up of this matter at a Deanery Conference, may not even yet be fully aware of the existence of this new system of law. It has necessitated the setting up of a special office within the Congregation of Religious, the Secretary-General of which, incidentally, is a layman—itsself something of a revolutionary nature in that body.¹ It has been necessary to insert a new page into editions of such typical manuals as that of Vermeersch-Creusen, and doubtless into others too; a quite formidable body of canonical literature on the subject has already accumulated, as will be plain to anyone who watches the bibliographical sections of ecclesiastical periodicals. It may be necessary for a priest to make some attempt to cope with this mass of material, if he has a Secular Institute in his parish, or is called on to direct aspirants, or asked to help Institutes in their "formation", by giving them retreats, recollections, or lectures, and the like. Even if he is not directly drawn into the orbit of the Institutes in these ways, he must not fail to distinguish them "from other general Associations of the faithful" (*C.I.C., Pars III, Lib. II*), as well as from every variety of the religious life.² In his preaching of the ideal of Christian sanctity he may no longer utilize the religious state alone as an exemplar, but must know how to utilize this new way of life as well.

This may appear to be an undue emphasis on a merely

¹ He is Don Alvarez del Portillo, member of the *Opus Dei*.

² *Provida Mater, lex peculiaris*, arts. 1-11, in *Sec. Instit.*, p. 48.

technical point, but it is not without importance. Many of the laity, admittedly, and many religious also, unless they happen to be superiors, may live almost without adverting to the existence of Canon Law. Save for such things as episcopal charges at a Visitation, annual proclamations of dispensation from the laws of fasting, or the marriage difficulties of a personal friend, the majority may remain comfortably insulated from the effects of ecclesiastical law. Its requirements for them are the Commandments of the Church listed in the Catechism or filtered down from the pulpit in occasional doses. They would be surprised, and perhaps disconcerted, to learn how minutely even their prayers and devotional life are regulated by the Code, and particularly any forms of association into which they may, through piety or charity, be inclined to enter. It is sometimes hard to see how all this could be passed on to them, without engendering a notion that Canon Law is the province of the hierarchy and the canonists, and comes down to the rest of us merely in the form of prohibitions and restrictions. The papal documents concerning Secular Institutes would do much to dispel this crippling idea, for they are conceived in a very different spirit. It has become a commonplace to refer to the *Provida Mater* as the *Magna Carta* of the Secular Institutes; it really is a charter of liberties for the Christian soul. May it not be that here is an eminently practical way of making Catholics aware of the nature of Canon Law, not simply as restrictions imposed on them by their rulers for the sake of discipline, but as a code of ideals and methods, intended to promote freedom of the spirit and broaden the horizons of every child of God?

If any of the more intelligent and keen of the laity are ever tempted to think that they are being forced to sustain a merely passive role, what better corrective is there than these insistent utterances of the Holy See on the autonomy, the responsibility and the active role played by "seculars"? It is, let us recall, the Church herself in her supreme juridical capacity, and not just a few "advanced" spiritual directors, clerical "*avant-gardistes*", or religious cranks, who extol this new people and bid them emerge from their hidden life into a more public mission for God and for souls.

The Church that Christ founded is a society, and must

have a juridical entity; it is also a visible Church existing in a framework of time and space. In contemplating her we must therefore endeavour to take a total view of the whole human condition, which can be reached only by profound reflexion on the providential nature of all God's dealings with man. Hence the necessity for what is termed "Church history". We are the product of our age and of the past; we cannot know ourselves in the present or the future, unless we take account of *all* the revolutions which separate us from our Pentecostal beginnings in Jerusalem. The particular revolution of ideas, attitudes, applications and methods, which we have designated the movement towards the Secular Institutes, is more than an additional footnote or paragraph to be added to our manuals of Church history; it is a feature of contemporary Catholic life which furnishes one of the essential clues to the interpretation of Christian and human life as a whole.

Not all, of course, are historians, or historically minded. Even priests whose seminary training included a course of ecclesiastical history may not have acquired a historical sense, or the conviction that this was a major subject, like dogmatic, moral or pastoral theology, with an obligation to keep themselves up to date in it, but they have at least become aware of the importance of sound historical method in all ecclesiastical studies today. As for the laity, one can usually count on a tincture of the historical sense, if only because of the demands of apologetics in a non-Catholic *milieu*—how to answer stock objections about Henry VIII's divorce proceedings, the Albigensian Crusade, and—unfailingly—the Inquisition. But here, in the history of the Secular Institutes, we have a phase of our own interior development which cannot be neglected without detriment.

History, to be complete, must be the history of the whole man, including his deepest thoughts and his finest intuitions about the very meaning of life and how it should be lived. Accordingly, the history of the Church must include every phase of the soul's endeavour to find itself and God. The stages through which the Christian has gone in his quest for perfection, in effective imitation of Christ, in union with God in charity and in prayer, simply cannot be regarded as "some aspects of the internal life of the Church"; in a sense, they are

the whole of it. Successive patterns of holiness, such as martyrdom, confessorship and consecrated virginity regarded as substitute for "red" martyrdom, the "regimentation" of prayer and spiritual exercises in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, are all of them essential ingredients of our contemporary Catholicism, and on this plane the rise of the Secular Institutes naturally and inevitably takes its place.

It is not merely that here are more data to be added for the sake of completeness: the movement in question enforces on the church historian the task of re-reading and, perhaps, reinterpreting the already accumulated data. Thus the programme of the Franciscan and other Third Orders, the projects of St Angela Merici, of Mary Ward, of St Vincent de Paul and of many other contributors to perfect Christian living need re-assessment in light of the enlarged categories provided by the Secular Institutes.

One of the lessons of history is the power of the Religious Institutes to proliferate and adapt themselves to great diversities of circumstance, even to rise from the dead. This should be a salutary warning against any inclination to dismiss the Secular Institutes as a fortuitous and passing growth, a mere historical accident, the religious life desperately attempting to cope with the extraordinary needs of our time. The Secular Institutes are an essential part of the modern Catholic Revival. It is noteworthy that whatever aspect of this we choose to examine—whether the liturgico-pastoral renewal, the Biblical and patristic renewal, the Lay Apostolate, or Catholic Action—we are likely to meet the members of these new Institutes at every turn. None of these aspects, particularly the last two, are synonymous with Secular Institutes, but they invariably penetrate one another and overlap.

The signs are that the Secular Institutes have "come to stay". It is noteworthy, however, that Pius XII wished to keep the movement fluid and to circumvent attempts at premature crystallization. The Institutes are an important stage in Catholic development; they are also a pointer towards fresh developments in the future, ever in the direction of a fuller, deeper grasp of the possibilities of Christian life and its inexhaustible adaptability in a changeful world.

Ultimately, however, it is not simply a matter of broadening our canonical horizons, or deepening our historical awareness of the delightful variety of ways in the Christian life; what is chiefly involved is the importance of the Secular Institutes in the theological presentation of the theory and practice of the spiritual life. The Church in her mission to baptize all nations and sanctify the souls of all her children, has unceasingly placed a lofty ideal of perfection before all who would listen. Even when preaching conversion to the hardened sinner or trying to arouse the tepid, she cannot and dare not dilute this high ideal to nominal Catholicism or mediocre practice. She must find ways of teaching the same lesson to the lax as to the fervent; like her Master she must quest in the desert ways for the souls of unbelievers and the indifferent, the unascetical and the anti-clerical. This becomes harder when classical, traditional patterns of holiness, though still remaining *per se* as valid as ever, begin to sound old-fashioned, mediaeval, merely restrictive or too much tied down to formulas and images which have emptied themselves of meaning for many to whom the lesson is addressed. Here, precisely, the "modernity" and the sanctified "secularity" of the new Institutes, to say nothing of their rediscovery and re-evaluation of some of the most ancient elements of sanctity, place a new and valuable weapon in the armoury of the Christian preacher. Once again, he, like some primitive Christian bishop, can use the *argumentum ad hominem*, and point to the Secular Institutes as the bishops did to the ancient ascetics and virgins, saying: "See, these are men and women, just like yourselves, with the same nature, and the same temptations . . . living in the same cities, the same streets, doing the same work, etc." with a full sense of conviction that their words will ring true and awaken a genuine echo in the hearts of many modern people.

It has been discussed, sometimes academically, whether one should speak of a "spirituality" or a "theology" of the lay state,¹ but there can be no doubt whatever that we must have a soundly theological presentation of the perfect Christian life, one which is entirely attuned to the actual conditions and cultural rhythms of the people who form our congregations and is

¹ Beyer, *op. cit.*, pp. 95 ff.

not just lifeless adaptation of the spirituality of the past, or of the clerical or religious state. Here again, Secular Institutes are not only a timely new exemplar, but their members aim at being themselves active workers in this important field. One of the most admirable features of the new legislation is its insistence on adequate theological and spiritual formation. The clergy need not fear that these new auxiliaries in the apostolate will be allowed to remain content with merely amateur standards; nor are they likely to be embarrassed by the sudden access of undisciplined and uninformed zeal. Nevertheless, the existing Institutes, and other aspiring groups in this country, will need for some time to come a good deal of sympathetic assistance from clergy and religious in maintaining the high ideals which have been set before them. They need also much mutual understanding and, at least in certain fields where it proves to be feasible, some degree of collaboration.

It is still possible, I suppose, for a priest in Great Britain, who left the seminary just after the Second World War, not yet to have made any effective contact with the movement. It would certainly be possible for his brother or sister to leave school shortly afterwards, practise the faith with more than average fidelity, take part in several Catholic activities, join more than one association for piety or charity, and still not consciously meet any member of a Secular Institute. Possible, though not nearly so easy as it was for their parents. It seems doubtful if this will be even possible in future. Few as are the Institutes established here, they can no longer be regarded as wholly exotic, foreign, or ill-adapted to local apostolic requirements. What has happened in so many countries abroad will happen here also; the Institutes will emerge from their comparative obscurity, become more generally known, and finally, be taken for granted. Then only shall we be able to see the marvellous way in which a more than common generosity has corresponded with divine grace, to produce this "new people" in God's Church.

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