

IN THE SAME CHARISM

with responsibility



n. 3 - 2013

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SECULAR INSTITUTE OF SAINT ANGELA MERICI
FEDERATION**

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International Meeting of the Federation

*Women Consecrated in Secularity
from the Council to Today*



San Marino July 28 – August 1, 2013

ACTS

TO THE READERS

Be gentle and compassionate... (2nd Counsel 1)

One more meeting on consecration in secularity... it was not the first and will not be the last.

In San Marino from July 28 to August 1, 2013, we held the Federation's International Meeting, *united together in the same charism*, with great joy and just as much responsibility. The fine and profound presentations of the speakers, who were very knowledgeable and friendly to the Companies, the strong relationships among us... Groups and Companies open to our way of being in the world...

Throughout the days of the gathering, these words of St. Angela re-echoed insistently inside me: *Be gentle and compassionate...* When I had returned to other duties, and then to the daily routine, this invitation of the Foundress seemed to me a good program for living our secular consecration well.

Be gentle and compassionate... is a criterion, a quality suggested by St. Angela for our relationships in the Company, and a quality that we may be able to employ in living totally for God in the world.

Be gentle and compassionate... is the style of life appropriate to our secularity, a way of being rather than of doing. To be gentle and compassionate is a matter of a heart that is peaceful, free, overflowing with charity and tenderness. It means having the kind of heart that St. Angela wished: *a heart pure and conscience clean of every evil thought, of every shadow of envy and ill will, of every discord and evil suspicion....* It means living in joy, an interior joy, I would say theological, suggested by our Foundress: *be happy, and always full of charity and faith and hope in God.*

Be gentle and compassionate... is our spirituality, a Gospel spirituality: *“Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart... my yoke is easy and my burden is light”* (Mt 11:29-30).

If Christ is our point of reference, the one we reach toward, *the Lover of us all, our only treasure...* we should live in Him, for Him, with Him. We should, as our Constitutions say, *joyously welcome Christ and serve him lovingly and gently in each human being, beginning with the poorest.*

Be gentle and compassionate... is our witness in the world and in history, it is our entry point into relationships that are friendly, humble, prudent, true, profound, as the Apostle invites us: *“Your kindness should be known to all”* (Phil 4:5).

It means to link kindness and compassion with the fruits of the Holy Spirit: *love, joy, peace, magnanimity, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control.*

With gentleness and compassion... *we will be open to the needs of our sisters and brothers, and to our commitment to build the city of humanity in solidarity, and in the defence of truth and justice* (cf. Constitutions 22.3).

Be gentle and compassionate... in the Company and in the world as consecrated seculars, in this *admirable form of life that our Savior lived, and with Him, our Lady, the Apostles, the Virgins and many Christians of the early Church* (cf. Constitutions 2.2).

Finally we are in good company... a Company that continues to explore the theology of consecrated secularity and desires to live it fully in the Merician spirit. In reading, in meditation, in the desire to transform the Acts of the Federation’s 2013 meeting into a way of life, we greet one another and undertake to be, everywhere and to all ... *gentle and compassionate....*

(Caterina Dalmasso)

THE PRESIDENT'S INTRODUCTION TO THE INTERNATIONAL MEETING OF 2013

Maria Razza

With great joy we are here at our international meeting. I welcome you in my name and in that of the Federation Council.

I greet each one of you: Bishop Adriano Tessarollo, assistant to the Council; the reverend ecclesiastical assistants; the speakers who will help us reflect on the theme that we have synthesized in the title, *“Women Consecrated in Secularity from the Council to Today.”*

Permit me to greet and thank particularly Fr. Modesto Todeschi; being in Italy for his institute's chapter, he accepted our invitation. To his effective mediation we owe the launch of the Group of Bene-Angela of Burundi, whose history I think you all know.

Thanks to all, because your presence is a sign of sharing, participation and interest in our institute, which we want to render ever lovelier as a result of the beauty of those who belong and of those who care about it.

We desire to maintain among ourselves the atmosphere of sisterhood and of family that distinguishes us, and we desire to commit ourselves to listening for all that we expect to receive in these days, new incentives to awareness, research and analysis.

. We always need to turn to reflection, whether personally or together, as Companies and Groups, on **our consecration to God in secularity**. We need to respond faithfully, according to the times, to our personal call from God and to the call that is being made to our institute.

The Federation Council, in obedience to the resolutions that last year's Assembly assigned to us, wanted to begin with this meeting by retying the “common thread” of “secular consecration,” once again reading, more maturely and deeply,

the documents that the magisterium has directed to us in these last fifty years, particularly from the Second Vatican Council to today.

Bishop Adriano Tessarollo, ecclesiastical assistant of the Federation Council, will guide us along this course. He is a fine biblical scholar, on whom we can count and whose deep and brotherly affection makes him one with us. We will now be able to appreciate the lively skills of our friend Marisa Sfondrini. We have already come to know Fr. Massimo Naro through his fine and respected presentation at our meeting in Sardinia. Each contribution is a gift for every one of us, for our Companies, and for the Groups, so that the renewal that we wish to carry out may be the fruit of our desire for and commitment to “creative fidelity” to our particular Merician charism.

All of us have planted deep in our hearts St. Angela’s mandate, “*If, according to times and circumstances, the need arises to make new rules or do something differently, do it prudently and with good advice*” (Last Legacy 2). To carry out “*prudently and with good advice*” what is asked of us by the historic circumstances we find ourselves in, to respond to the expectations of the world and of the Church, we need to think, because the primary renewal involves our way of thinking and of thinking about ourselves, reflecting together, consulting one another, ripening our convictions and shared attitudes.

We will take up again in the Companies and in the Groups the contributions that are about to be presented to us, and that we will have available when we plan programs for next year, knowing well that, as our Madre always suggests to us, the primary renewal begins with each one of us leading “*a new life*” (Seventh Counsel, 22).

1. FIFTY YEARS AFTER THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL: WHAT KIND OF PRESENCE DOES THE LAITY HAVE IN THE WORLD?

Most Rev. Adriano Tessarollo
Assistant to the Council of the Federation

One of the great themes running through the Council was the responsibility of lay people in the Church and the world. First I would like to review briefly the most significant text of the Second Vatican Council.

The Second Vatican Council dedicated particular attention to the reality of the laity. Chapter 4 of *Lumen Gentium* represents the first conciliar text in the entire history of the Church dedicated to the identity and the role of the laity.

There it affirms, in particular, two elements that qualify the laity in relationship to the mission: (U. Sartorio, Lines on the debate over the laity in the postconciliar period in Italy, “The 1987 Synod and *Christifideles laici*” in *Credere oggi* n. 3, 1994, p. 48.)

- Ecclesiality: Not only does the laity belong to the Church, but it is the Church, and its presence to the world is nothing other than the Church’s presence to the world. In this way, the concept of the laity being a bridge, like a delegate of the Church in relationship to the world, is decisively trumped. (M.D. Chenu, *The Laity and the Consecration of the World*.) “The lay person is no longer an intermediary, but is the Church itself ‘in’ the world, in the profane world.”



- Secularity: The laity is called to live its ecclesiality, in a secular manner, in the so-called secular environment, where its task is the construction of the reign of God. “The laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God” (*Lumen Gentium* 31).

A– THE SPECIFIC NATURE OF THE LAITY

Lumen Gentium, n. 31: “The term laity is here understood to mean all the faithful except those in holy orders and those in the state of religious life specially approved by the Church. These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world.”

Here we have three expressions that define the laity:

- **MADE ONE BODY WITH CHRIST** through Baptism. “The lay faithful, together with all the other members of the Church, are branches engrafted to Christ the true vine, and from him derive their life and fruitfulness” (*Christifideles laici* n. 9).

The laity then has its own essential identity in the fact that it is in Christ as a living shoot. This implies that the Christian lay person is first of all grounded in a personal decision to accept the divine project of salvation, as a free gift, choosing Christ as the model of one’s life and allowing oneself to be truly molded in the school of his Word. Therefore, definitively, the identity of the lay person is essentially based on belonging to Christ, on being part of him.

Constituted among the **PEOPLE of GOD**. The lay person is a member of the People of God. Being part of the new People of God makes one “chosen” by God with the

precise purpose of making all people aware that God enters their history to save them. This happens through one's identity even before it becomes one's mission. For this purpose God uses the response of those who accept being part of God's people.

· In the **CHURCH AND IN THE WORLD** they carry out the mission that belongs to all Christians. The lay person lives the baptismal vocation. This consists of building the Reign of God through a life striving for evangelical perfection and fulfilling one's own task of evangelization in interactions with the world. It means assuming the burden of the complex problems of secular reality, being present as a sign of God's merciful and salvific attention.

LG 31 continues:

“What specifically characterizes the laity is their secular nature.... The laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of 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 that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven. In this way they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity. Therefore, since they are tightly bound up in all types of temporal affairs it is their special task to order and to throw light upon these affairs in such a way that they may come into being and then continually



increase according to Christ to the praise of the Creator and the Redeemer.”

What defines the laity is:

- **Secularity**: Seeking the Reign of God happens for the laity in its secularity, that is, in ordinary familial and social life, the secular reality into which the laity is “woven”;

- **Acting within history**: The lay vocation is to seek God’s Reign, not by conquering history but by inserting oneself vigorously into history in order to sanctify it. The witness of a life illuminated by faith, supported by hope and animated by charity is the way to teach by manifesting Christ to others.

- **Dealing with temporal matters** (created reality and its context): The laity are seen as “the world’s soul” as we read in the Letter to Diogenes, n. 6: “as the soul is in the body, so are Christians in the world” (also quoted in LG 38).

- * **Participation in Christ’s priestly office**: The Council affirms that with Baptism the laity are intimately united to the life and mission of Christ, even participating in his priestly office. As Christ knew how to give himself, becoming an offering to the Father for the reconciliation of God and humanity, so the laity must guard and direct secular reality, establishing in their lives a deep communion with the Spirit. This will permit them to make “sacred” – that is, acceptable to God – their work, their joy, their suffering, their prayer. Therefore, the priestly task of the laity is to instill in the situations where they live and work a spiritual dimension. This spirituality will offer meaning and significance as a response to the subconscious expectation that the human spirit feels and strives for in the diverse situations of life.

- * **Participation in Christ’s prophetic office**: Participating in the prophetic dignity of Christ principally requires the laity to live what they are: witnesses to the Gospel.

* **Participation in Christ's royal office:** The Council outlines the royal function of Christ and the participation of believers in this office: "Christ, becoming obedient even unto death and because of this exalted by the Father, entered into the glory of His kingdom. To Him all things are made subject until He subjects Himself and all created things to the Father that God may be all in all. Now Christ has communicated this royal power to His disciples that they might be constituted in royal freedom" (*Lumen gentium* n. 36).

B- "AUTHENTIC" LAITY IN BELONGING BOTH "TO THE CHURCH AND TO THE WORLD"

Ad Gentes, in n. 21, titled "Promoting the apostolate of the laity," declares:

"The church has not been really founded, and is not yet fully alive, nor is it a perfect sign of Christ among men, unless there is a laity worthy of the name working along with the hierarchy. For the Gospel cannot be deeply grounded in the abilities, life and work of any people without the active presence of lay [people]. Therefore, even at the very founding of a Church, great attention is to be paid to establishing a mature, Christian laity. For the lay faithful fully belong at one and the same time both to the People of God and to civil society."

In her very being, in her self-revelation and in her mission, the Church needs the essential presence of an authentic, dynamic and mature laity that collaborates with the hierarchy (ordained ministers). Therefore the Church is not identified solely as the hierarchy, but is seen as "God's people on the road through history." All have the same dignity on the basis of Baptism, though with different tasks, and all share the same call



to holiness.

Again *Ad Gentes*, n. 21, says: *“For the lay faithful fully belong at one and the same time both to the People of God and to civil society: they belong to the nation in which they were born; they have begun to share in its cultural treasures by means of their education; they are joined to its life by manifold social ties; they are cooperating in its progress by their efforts, each in his own profession; they feel its problems to be their very own, and they are trying to solve them. They also belong to Christ, because they were regenerated in the Church by faith and by baptism, so that they are Christ’s in newness of life and work, in order that in Christ, all things may be made subject to God, and finally God will be all in all.”*



The emphasis falls on full insertion in both the laity’s own human, social, cultural, political, and economic situation and at the same time on its belonging to Christ and

being fully inserted in the Church and in its sacramental and spiritual life. The laity’s double belonging is underlined: belonging to God and to the world, to the Church and to society, to eternity and to time, to one’s earthly country and to the heavenly homeland, to the “City of God” and to the “City of Man,” as Saint Augustine says.

Vatican II, in the relevant documents – especially *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* – considers the laity in a Christological perspective. In the documents preceding the Second Vatican Council, thought was given to these members of the People of God who are in the world; that they are inserted in activities related to the temporal order in order to enliven earthly society, organized society. In this way the focus was on the context – the world in which the laity are inserted.

However, being in the world is not the definition of Christian laity, but of the human person, insofar as all people are in the world. Furthermore, it is not so much being in the world that describes and defines lay people as Christians, but their relationship to Jesus Christ.

The previous societal and functional concept of the Church's ministries is overturned: the idea that the clergy have tasks that are internal to the Christian society and have full powers, with an active part in building up the Christian people; and the idea that the laity belong in external relations, in enlivening earthly society. In this way of thinking, priests do certain things, the sacred things; lay people do other things, the profane things. All are called to Christian holiness, although in different ways, recognizing that every human situation can contain the fullness of Christian living.

It is now understood that being in the world constitutes a Christian value because Christ himself intrinsically shares in it: it is this relationship to Christ that defines the reality of the laity. Also, being in the world constitutes a Christian value because it is within as Christ is *within* the world even if not *of* the world, and *for* the world even if sometimes *against* the world. Incorporation into Christ, in fact, is not and must not appear as an alienation from the world, but as an elevation of the world's value. Chapter 2 of *Lumen Gentium* offers a new concept of ministries, recalling that communion with Christ makes them part of his service to that world that the Father has loved to the point of sending into it his only Son.

This is the crux, one of the most crucial elements, and today a main topic of attention and of debate.

It follows from the title of the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (*Gaudium et Spes*). The original title said, "Church and contemporary world." Substituting "in" in place of "and" was the fruit of a long debate at the Council and showed that "the Church is smaller

than the world: and this obliges it, if it wants to be an instrument of salvation, to think like a mustard seed” (Piero Stefani). The initial declaration sets the theme: *“The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of [human beings]. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every man. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds.”*



Gaudium et Spes seems to present an image of a Church immersed in the world so as to be in solidarity with its joys and its hopes and to take on the griefs and anxieties *“especially of those who are poor or in any way afflicted.”* The laity is

called and invited to work amid these realities, to which it belongs, making them its own.

The laity must pose questions. What are they like, these “joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted”? These become “the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ,” and “nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.” What are they like, the values appropriate to the contemporary world, values worthy to be embraced (freedom of thought and speech, political democracy, science, technology, etc.)? What language do lay people have to speak in order to be meaningful and incisive in building the “earthly city”?

**2. IN THE YEAR OF FAITH:
WHAT SORT OF PERSONAL AND PUBLIC WITNESS
BY THE LAITY IS POSSIBLE IN OUR COMPLEX
SOCIETY THAT IS MULTICULTURAL,
MULTIETHNIC AND MULTIRELIGIOUS?**

**Most Rev. Adriano Tassarollo
Assistant to the Council of the Federation**

**Introduction Faith: recognizing and entering into the
mystery of God**

(God is revealed and calls. One accepts him.)



“One who does not love mystery does not know God. Such a person looks at him and continually loses sight of the true God, adores his image made in one’s own likeness, instead of adoring him” (Karl Rahner).

Making sense of human existence means learning to accept dealing with mystery. Mystery, not as the limit of our being and our life, but considered in itself with amazement and joy, believing, accepting, loving, adoring.

To live in biblical faith means to surrender one’s own being, in love, to the mystery. It remains always, and we are immersed in its abyss.

The mystery of the God of the Bible is already manifested freely and gratuitously on its first pages, so as to speak his whole self to his creatures, that they may know him, adore him and love him. Man and woman, created by God “in his image and likeness” (Genesis 1:26), receive as a gift a sort of “instinct” (St. Thomas) to intuit in some way his infinite

dimensions. Receiving from him “the breath of life,” they become capable of entering into his mystery, as far as possible for a human creature.

In the first days of creation, the mystery of God is revealed as creative power, wisdom of universal design, originality of invention, an offer of comfortable and pleasant dialogue, and a desire for collaboration in transmitting the gift of life, caring for the earth and making it habitable. The mystery of God comes ever closer to the man and the woman. “They heard the sound of the LORD God moving about in the garden at the breezy time of the day” (Genesis 3:8).

These considerations help us grasp the “authentic” meaning of “laity” as a way of living one’s relationship with God and a way of “secularity” as the “place” for collaboration to bring about God’s design.

“Covenant” is nothing other than God pledging to human beings to share their existence completely.

1 Unity of life: God’s love for us and our love for our neighbor

“Be perfect, just as your heavenly father is perfect” (Mt 5:48).

The typical dimension of the faithful lay person’s secularity is the ordinary dailiness of family, social, professional, and ecclesial life. Therefore an appropriate spirituality for this lay person has to be bound up in the ordinary and the daily. For the lay disciple, the light of the Gospel and one’s personal relationship with Christ filter into daily living.

Jesus ascribes to his heavenly Father the sentiments, attitudes, deeds, and words that typify human life. These all function within the limits of analogy: God is like us, because we were “created in his image and likeness.”

But God is infinitely different from us, because his is “a unique and inexpressible mystery” of wisdom and goodness. In God lives the fullness of all good, without any evil. God loves even those who do not love him: “He makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust” (Matthew 5:45). God appreciates the humble and penitent heart, like that of the publican, who prays in the temple standing in the back and not daring to raise his eyes to heaven (Luke 18:9-14). God prefers the one who fasts to do penance but anoints his head rather than sprinkling it with ashes and does good deeds without blowing a trumpet and does not “let the left hand know what the right is doing” (Matthew 6:3).

Clear eyes please the Creator Father, mirroring the soul, God’s dwelling within us.

“The lamp of the body is the eye. If your eye is sound, your whole body will be filled with light” (Matthew 6:22).

The Father knows the hearts of his creatures and knows that the human heart is an abyss: Jesus truly declared, “God knows your hearts” (Luke 16:15), and the Psalmist sings, “O just God, who tries hearts and minds” (Psalm 7:10).

God the Father cares about his children and “knows [what] you need” (Matthew 6:32). “God sees and provides,” says popular wisdom. Jesus lingers over the Father’s “providential activity,” which the Old Testament amply affirmed and praised. The revelation that comes through Jesus offers the following passages to present correctly a theme that is not always easy but that is to be received in faith.

- God’s children should “not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...but...in heaven” (vv.19-20), “For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be” (v. 21). God’s children cannot “serve both God and mammon” (v. 23). They must not “worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food

and the body more than clothing?” (v. 25). “Worrying” is different from taking responsibility or being concerned. Worry marks those who do not have faith (v. 32). The believer is asked to look upon nature with clear and respectful eyes, with the courage of trust in God’s goodness and action, and with the humility of faith, which enables one to take on responsibility and sacrifice oneself without the “worry” that destroys trustful self-abandonment.

- God’s providence works within faith. Jesus explicitly laments, “O you of little faith!” (v. 30). In this sense Jesus opens up an even wider perspective: “But seek first the kingdom (of God) and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides” (v. 33). That is, God’s children must set their sure foundation for food, drink, clothing and peace on the implementation of “the Reign of God” and of God’s “righteousness.” The incapacity, the laziness of God’s children in bringing about his Reign and his righteousness make the lives of so many human beings difficult, often tragic. Poverty, illnesses, injustices, exploitation, wars, and violence obscure, hide, and block God’s providence. These are the fault of the children who fall short on the Father. “The poor eat every day from the hand of God. We are the hand of God, because God has no hands. He has only our hands” (J. Bernanos). The first blasphemy against divine Providence is Cain’s answer to the Creator God: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:9).

- An authentic invitation to “serve divine providence” is Jesus’ word to his apostles before the multiplication of the loaves and fish: ““Give them some food yourselves” (Mark 6:37) (not to be reduced to only a cultural-liturgical reading).

- The Father loves to celebrate the return of children who have distanced themselves from him. Jesus says, “I tell you, in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven” (Luke 15:7). Jesus is dying on the cross, with no fear of being wrong when he says to the good thief, “Amen, I say to you, today you will

be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43); Jesus also says, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Jesus asks the Father to pardon the sin of killing his Son, the only-begotten in whom he is well pleased, the innocent, the holy: the Father loves enemies, pardons the repentant sinner, and does not judge but saves, granting a second chance. He gives to all, without measure (Luke 6:35-38).

In the light of all this, we hear Jesus’ invitation/command, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). “Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). “Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father” (Matthew 5:16).

2. “Lay” prayer and action

From the Gospel according to Matthew: “This is how you are to pray:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come,
your will be done, on earth as in heaven.



Give us today our daily bread;

and forgive us our debts, as we
forgive our debtors;

and do not subject us to the final
test, but deliver us from the evil
one” (Matthew 6:9-13).

What parts of life does this
prayer touch upon?

Prayer is a conversation and
filial dialogue with the Father; it is

done in private, with self-abandonment to his will, and with few words. "In praying, do not babble like the pagans, who think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them. Your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Matthew 6:7-8). The important thing is to recognize one's neediness and to ask with insistence and trust, like children who are sure that the Father listens and that he knows what will be a loving gift for us in every circumstance.

We never present ourselves to the Father alone but united to the first-born Son and always in solidarity with all. Our prayer and our offering are accepted only if we are reconciled with our brothers and sisters. "Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24). Jesus utilizes human images to make us understand, from close at hand, the continuity between prayer and life and the coherence between what we ask of the Father and what we offer to our brothers and sisters: "What father among you would hand his son a snake when he asks for a fish? Or hand him a scorpion when he asks for an egg? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in heaven give the holy Spirit to those who ask him?" (Luke 11:11-13).

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). Consistency between prayer and action. Because there is a false obedience and there is a true obedience. "A man had two sons. He came to the first and said, 'Son, go out and work in the vineyard today.' He said in reply, 'I will not' but afterwards changed his mind and went. The man went to the other son and gave the same order. He said in reply, 'Yes, sir,' but did not go. Which of the two did

his father's will? They answered, 'The first.' Jesus said to them, Amen I say to you, tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you" (Matthew 21:28-31).

"I urge you therefore...by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect" (Romans 12:1-2). Drawing the conclusions of his preceding doctrinal exposition, Paul presents a plan of life in service to God, which expresses itself in different circumstances of Christian life: from the community to personal relations, from peaceful relationships with all to the duties to civil institutions. The Christian lives a life of spiritual service to God, seeking his will, which has its center and its fullness in love.

3. A life that is both "spiritual" (according to the Spirit) and "secular" (committed in the world) today

In concluding his Gospel, Matthew reports Jesus' mandate to the apostles: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20). He assures them of his unfailing presence, but he has entrusted to them the task of "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." How? By following his example as the "firstborn Son": "I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do" (John 13:15). Walking with Jesus, God's children learn to be "light for the world" and "salt for the earth" and "leaven in the dough." They are the "lamp on the lamp stand," the "city on the hill," because all can see "your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father" (Matthew 5:16).

CONSECRATED LAITY: BUT ISN'T BAPTISM ENOUGH?

Marisa Sfrondrini, Journalist



NECESSARY PRELIMINARIES

Frankly I get annoyed when some speaker begins his/her discourse with the classic statement: “I’m making some preliminary remarks.” In my case, however, these are necessary for us to understand each other from the beginning.

a) First of all, I would like to tell you that I am not: not a theologian, a biblical scholar, an ecclesiologist, not even a historian. (Therefore, any historians present should not take offense at certain slightly reckless affirmations I may make.) With this intention, I will permit myself to express solely my own ideas, sometimes conjectures, sometimes a bit blasphemous. (But will it turn out that way?)

b) Professionally, I am a journalist and therefore, “curious” about life, about events, about the cultures that develop in every social environment and – being a Catholic – in the ecclesial environment. But I am convinced that a profession does not “create” a life; rather, life predisposes one to a profession, in some way.

c) Principally: I too am a consecrated lay woman, in the secular institute Missionaries of the Kingship of Our Lord Jesus Christ (with a spirituality inspired by Francis and Clare of Assisi), an institute in which I have no position of authority nor responsibility for governance.

d) This next thing I'm clearly saying to win your good will: I am a great niece of a secular Ursuline or "lay sister," as they were then commonly called. (My Aunt Rosina was born at the end of the nineteenth century.) Without either of us being aware of it, she was probably the one who planted inside me the seed of consecrated lay life. (I prefer the term "lay" to "secular"; so we'll be clear from the beginning.)

e) Finally, I would see this talk as the search for an historic profile of consecrated lay life, that is, how the idea of a full consecration ripened in the Christian community, remaining lay, perfectly and absolutely lay. I would also like to respond to the question, "But isn't Baptism enough?" It is a legitimate question because all the baptized are consecrated to God. The desire to assume an ecclesial-pastoral-apostolic commitment proper to a secular institute is also legitimate.

CAN WE GO BACK TO MARY OF NAZARETH?

I think that it may be important to reflect on the literal meaning of words, even if this can seem trivial. What does "consecrate" mean and thus "consecration," and further still, "consecrated"? The Italian dictionary gives these answers. To consecrate means "to render sacred with a religious ritual"; to be consecrated means "to be completely dedicated." From this it can be deduced that the consecrated person is one who "is completely dedicated."

The distinction between clergy and lay has always existed in advanced civilizations (Egyptian, Greco-roman), and the clergy have always had a preeminent position, being recognized as mediator between humanity and divinity, whatever that divinity might be.

Israel too had a recognized clergy, even designated by God himself: Aaron, Moses' brother, was the first "high priest." The descendants of the tribe of Levi (to which Moses too belonged) were in charge of the sacred.

The distinction has become more evident in Catholicism. However Jesus was not a priest in Israel, because he did not belong historically to the tribe of Levi. Jesus was recognized as “rabbi,” as “teacher.” Rav Yeshua ben Yoseph, as he was called by his contemporaries, was a teacher who knew how to explain sacred Scripture; his competence had a rather mysterious origin because he was not a disciple of any other famous teacher, as for example Gamaliel (at whose school Saul of Tarsus was later trained). Only some, then, became his disciples, recognizing him as the Messiah foretold by the prophets. Only to some – the Twelve – did Jesus give the mandate to announce the “good news.” But he did not create his own priestly caste (perhaps because in Israel it was a caste of power which was also political and cultural). He created servants (cf. the episode of the washing of feet in John’s Gospel). Lay servants.

No woman could be a priest in Israel, nor even a rabbi. But there was a woman whom God turned to so that humanity might be saved. With her assent to the angel’s message, Mary of Nazareth “was dedicated completely” to the Lord, to the Lord’s will for her, to the salvation of humanity. She was a “consecrated lay woman,” since it was not possible even for her to enter the priesthood (among other reasons, Mary was not even from the tribe of Levi).

It was a woman, or rather a little group of women, to whom the Risen One first revealed himself, perhaps because only the women did not abandon him; they were running – regardless of the fear – to embalm his body. Perhaps because a woman, a public sinner, had anointed his body with precious perfume while he was alive...

Already, these were “consecrated lay women,” that is, women who were “completely dedicated” to the Lord and to his cause. (Further, as a scholarly Roman woman humorously has observed, “At the Last Supper the apostles didn’t prepare

the Paschal banquet by themselves,” and women did participate in the Passover dinner, and so were disciples.) There were surely women among the disciples, probably contact persons for other groups of women.... Women had “prepared the banquet” and so had eaten with the disciples in the first “holy meals” after the Resurrection.... But socially women did not count (*“Those who ate were about five thousand men, **without counting** the women and children”* (Matthew 14:21, in the episode of the multiplication of loaves and fish).

Other women “were completely dedicated” to God and to the Christian community in process of formation: already the *ecclesia* (the assembly called together), but still in search of its own historical-social configuration. Here we recall some women mentioned by the so-called antifeminist Paul of Tarsus, perhaps leaders of the community (“bishops?”). Certainly there were of them there at the service of the community and of the preaching disciples; some followed them in the apostolic mission. They were strong and charitable women; they were “deacons” (I prefer this to “deaconesses” because the suffix “ess” is not always a compliment!), that is responsible for works of charity. Like Tabitha (meaning gazelle), “*who was completely occupied with good works and alms*” and made “*tunics and cloaks*” for the community (Acts 9:36, 39), whom Peter raised to life. By the way, if I can add a recent news item: The bishop of Fribourg, Robert Zollitsch, and other German bishops have sought “a diaconate specifically for women: (which would not tamper with the Order of Deacons), recalling an ancient tradition, precisely of women deacons, that only lately disappeared in Germany.

In the history of the Church, in the primitive community the distinction between clerics and non-clerics (as those who are now called lay persons were then called) was less clear. Surely, there was a distinction of tasks: those who were dedicated to the proclamation of the Word, those who

were dedicated to good works, those who were simply baptized, participated in the life of the community; all ran the same risk of martyrdom for giving clear witness to Christ.

The primitive community, though participating in the prevailing culture that gave no importance to women (especially the Greek and Hebrew cultures, a little less the Roman), had great respect for them; in some cases (as in that cited by the apostle Paul) it even appreciated them. After all, many communities had survived because rich women generously supported them!

Bit by bit as things proceeded in the Church's history (just as in human history) things changed, got complicated. The Christian community was organized according to the rules of the "profane" community. A hierarchy was created, surely necessitated by the community's expansion, by problems within it that erupted from the very beginning (the argument between Peter and Paul, for example). An unmarried clergy came into being (the apostles certainly had families). In the Church woman was perceived as "*ianua inferi*" "the gate of hell"), the temptress, and here the discourse on "Eve's sin" carries weight, as though in the "myth" of original sin Adam had nothing to do with it. (We recall that Blessed John Paul II dismantled this "myth" in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, his apostolic letter of August 15, 1988, cf. 9-10.)

Women are excluded from the sacrament of Holy



Orders; to act "*in persona Christi*" is only for the male of the human species, since Jesus of Nazareth was male. (But could he have been female in a world that culturally

devalued women?) Only the “lay state” is allowed to women, as we may say later.

But the sacraments, rooted in Baptism and Eucharist, are the “common patrimony” of women and men! And Baptism makes us all “consecrated,” that is to say, “completely dedicated” to God, all made into brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, the Son.

OUT OF THE WORLD, “AGAINST” THE WORLD?

Striding through history, we can see how the desire to serve the Lord only and completely becomes a road quickly enough. In the first centuries, monasticism was born (first for men), that created people “separate” from the world, which was recognized as a sewer of vice, the origin of sin, in need of



salvation. Western monasticism took shape, finding its foundation in St. Benedict and his Rule.

Clergy and laity (or “belonging to the people”) were separated in a certain way. The clergy were assigned to be involved with the “sacred” in a certain way, and the laity with the “profane.” However, in women too arose the desire to be “separate and responsible for the sacred” in a certain way. But even before women’s monasteries came into being (flourishing and datable around the 7th – 8th centuries), already in the 4th century there were examples of the consecration of women who remained in their lay “state.”

In fact, a form of consecration to God while remaining in one’s family existed, that is already in the first centuries of Christianity. It was presented as consecrated virginity or celibacy for the Kingdom, and dealt with men and women who intended to live in integral observance of the Gospel. These

vocations for consecration to God lived completely in the world flourished especially among Christians scattered in communities that were still pagan.

This was the case of Marcellina, the sister of Aurelius Ambrose and Uranio Satiro (St. Ambrose and St. Satiro; the former was bishop of Milan, Doctor of the Church, born in Treviri on an uncertain date between 339-340 and died in Milan in 397). Marcellina (St. Marcellina) also felt called to serve the Lord alone; Ambrose consecrated her and she remained at home, doing “things as usual,” an unmarried lay woman (rare at the time), but consecrated. Her brother dedicated *De Virginitate* to her.

Like Marcellina, some women of the Roman aristocracy gathered around St. Jerome, followed his advice, and led a life of prayer, but did not live together. From the account of St. Benedict’s life we know that his sister Scholastica lived near Casino with a group of companions. The first women’s monasteries were founded and received numerous women belonging to the Lombard nobility, who often fulfilled important responsibilities. The women’s monastic communities followed the Rule of St. Benedict, even though for them the obligations were expected to be less difficult.



Therefore, the need for complete dedication to “the Lord’s work” is ancient. After the monasteries, there arose other types of communities of

“brothers” and of “sisters,” who united the life of prayer ever more firmly to the active life (mendicant orders, preaching orders, etc.). In communities of men there were both priests

and lay brothers. Among women, all were lay. But all were “religious.”

LAY PERSONS: WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE?

We said before that *lay* means *belonging to the people*. The laity was defined negatively, by difference, as “*not clergy*.” And this functioned well for all, especially in the West. “Sacred” and “profane” were distinct and separate concepts. Spiritually too – at least in many cases – even belonging to the Church (the Catholic Church, after the various schisms), Baptism, Eucharist could be considered a “private matter” distinguished from “public life.” (That still happens today with so-called “devout atheists,” people who show off their membership in the Church for political purposes or power.)

A primary problem is the “laity of the state,” of political power. In the Middle Ages political power was deeply permeated with sacred charge, almost all monarchies received the right to govern from the Pope himself. During the struggle over investiture the problem of hierarchical relationships between the papacy and the Holy Roman Empire emerged, a question that was constantly posed again every time prominent personages came to the imperial throne, such as Frederick Barbarossa or Frederick II.

In the course of the 14th century, with the Western Schism, the universalistic western idea of the papacy as a superior power recognized by all of Christian Europe, reached its peak during the conflict between King Philip the Handsome of France and Boniface VIII, which drove the pontiff to harsh humiliation with the “insult of Anagni” and led to the development of the “theory of regalism” by jurists in Philip’s court. In those years juridical-philosophical studies developed in the hope of mending the fracture between political-temporal and spiritual power, theorizing about their relationship.

Attempts at accommodation were opposed to the hierarchical superiority of the papacy, reaffirmed by Boniface VIII with the bull *Unam Sanctam*. For example, in his *De Monarchia* Dante Alighieri saw in God the higher source of all rights whatsoever and energetically hoped for the separation of temporal and spiritual power, as did other studies too.

There was a step forward in the very next epoch of Emperor Louis of Bavaria, who repudiated papal authority by having himself crowned in Rome by a lay senator, the Sciarra Colonna who had humiliated the deceased Pope Boniface at Anagni.

Following Louis, the first theorists about the laity of the state went to work; according to some the same bishops would have to be elected in a popular assembly and the maximum religious authority would have had to be the council, not the Pope. The temporal power was still recognized as deriving from God, not through the intercession of the Pope, but through the intercession of the people, who still had the right to revoke such power; thus the delegation to exercise power, given by the people, was never absolute but was conditioned on good governance. We are close to democracy. With Marsilio of Padua and William of Ockham the idea about the foundations of state power, understood in a modern sense, gains support.

Starting from criticism of political power as power descending from the sacred – resulting in the concept of the laity of the state – we now arrive at another concept of laity. To be “non clerical” is, by definition, not an ideal, if it calls for something different. We know that the Second Vatican Council would find it in the 20th century! Meanwhile, like a shiver up the back, in the medieval Church (and later in all the Church) the quest for a lay consecration was developing, that is to say, a type of consecration that is woven into the “normal” life of a baptized person.

IN THE WORLD BUT NOT OF THE WORLD: FOR THE WORLD

Beginning with the secular Third Orders (from the 13th century) lay people, married or not, gathered around the great religious orders (Franciscan, Dominican, Carmelite...) taking on their spirituality. There are examples of great saints, like St. Louis IX king of France or St. Catherine of Siena. In this way forms of lay consecration spread, even if they were not structured as true and proper secular institutes.

Other attempts came as though by historical necessity. I am not about to risk telling here the story of St. Angela Merici (Desenzano del Garda, March 21, 1474 – Brescia, January 27, 1540) and of her disciples.

Following the French Revolution (17th century), which abolished religious orders, some women religious, left without convents, continued to maintain their style of life even though they had been turned back into simple lay persons.

In the 19th century the first attempts at true and precise associations of lay persons consecrated to God. The Church, with the decree *Ecclesia Catholica*, confirmed in 1889 by Pope Leo XIII, gave the norms for approval of such bodies, whose members remained in the world and did not wear a habit that would distinguish them from other lay persons. Such bodies had to be approved as *pious unions*, put under the authority of the local bishop. It was a small step forward, especially because for about a thousand years there was no thought of a consecration to God that was not linked to separation from familial, professional, and social circles.

In Italy, the birth in 1870 of Catholic Action, an association of lay people actively committed in the Church's life, had a strong influence on the training of lay people ready to face the "new times." Precisely this new responsibility of the laity supported in some of them the desire to be consecrated, through remaining in their own situation of living. Thus the ideal of secular institutes began to spread, which can be

summed up in these three characteristics: consecration to God, secularity, apostolate.

At first it seemed too daring, almost revolutionary, to combine consecration to God and the situation of lay people living in the world, immersed in the world's situations: work, social-political responsibility, even family (father, mother, siblings...). Meanwhile new lay movements arose, accentuating the role of lay people in the Church.

In 1938, with the authorization of Pope Pius XI, a meeting took place in San Gallo, Switzerland, attended by founders and leaders of the twenty "sodalities of lay persons consecrated to God" from different countries. They agreed to petition the Holy See for recognition of these associations of lay people.

Father Agostino Gemelli, OFM, anticipated the Vatican's refusal of the possibility that the lay members of the Missionary Institute of the Kingship of Christ could profess religious vows, wrote an historical-juridical-canonical essay on associations of lay people consecrated to God in the world; in 1939 it was sent to the pope and to the appropriate Vatican congregation. But in November of that year the Holy Office (as it was then called) ordered Fr. Gemelli to withdraw it. That amounted to a return to the decree *Ecclesia Catholica* of 1889, with some slight retouching.

In 1947 Pius XII promulgated the apostolic constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia*, in which the history of the so-called "states of perfection" was traced, from the religious orders to the congregations and to the societies of common life. As the last phase the new institutes of lay people (and of secular priests) consecrated to God were inserted and given the name "secular institutes." It was a decisive step, because finally a place in the Church was acknowledged for a new form of consecrated life. However, there was resistance to this document, which did not satisfy the more profound feeling of

consecrated lay people because it represented the lay apostolate as a supplement to that of religious and priests.

In 1948 Pius XII issued the *motu proprio Primo feliciter*, which clarified *Provida Mater* and offered an “authentic” interpretation of it, indicating the two characteristics of this particular form of consecration: 1) true and complete consecration and 2) secularity (laity), that is, to announce the Word of salvation (apostolate) in the world with the means of the world (thus picking up an expression used by Agostino Gemelli in the essay of 1938L “*in seculo et ex seculo*”). Days later he issued the decree *Cum Sanctissimus*, a further commentary on the directives related to secular institutes.

This is how it was definitively clarified that, though members of secular institutes stand on an equal footing with members of religious institutes through their profession of the evangelical counsels, they are obviously distinct by the fact that separation from the world is proper to the religious state as are the common life or living under the same roof, nonetheless consecrated lay people continue to live as they have always lived (in the world, alone or in their families...).

BUT ISN'T BAPTISM ENOUGH?

At this point, after having analyzed, though briefly, the history of “laity” and of “secular institutes,” we come to the question contained in the title. This was suggested to me by an analogous question (which in itself, however, already contained the answer in the mind of the one who posed it to me). This question was put to me by a very dear friend, a woman of deepest spirituality, committed in her profession and in the Church, a theologian even though not an academic.... One of those people, to put it briefly, who is assumed to be “committed” in some “pious institute.” I had just confided to her my intention to try to enter the Missionaries of the

Kingship, honestly thinking that she was part of one such “office” (which is what we call our institute among friends on account of reserve).

At this she flared up, asking me, “But isn’t Baptism enough?” Because for her it was enough. Was Baptism not enough for me? Is Baptism not enough for us? Why is Baptism not enough for us?

All of us gathered here know the profound significance of the Church’s sacraments, especially in the life of single Christians and of the community. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church confirms in n. 1210, “Christ instituted the sacraments of the new law.... The seven sacraments touch all the stages and all the important moments of Christian life: they give birth and increase, healing and mission....”

It says in n. 1212: “The sacraments of Christian initiation - Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist - lay the foundations of every Christian life.” For Baptism is defined (n. 1213) as “the gateway to life in the Spirit (*vitae spiritualis ianua*), and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission.”

Again, still on the topic of Baptism, the Catechism says (n. 1223) “All the Old Covenant prefigurations find their fulfillment in Christ Jesus. He begins his public life after having himself baptized by St. John the Baptist in the Jordan. After his resurrection Christ gives this mission to his apostles: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you’ (Mt. 28:19-20).” These explanations on the topic of Baptism would prove my friend right. We would not need anything else to feel “committed all the way to the core.”

Be patient, but here I must speak again about myself. When in 1980 I spoke my definitive “yes” to the Lord, after a long and tiring search, which perhaps has still not ended, if not in its official part, the Catechism had not yet been printed. But in fact these contents were not unknown to me. I knew that the sacrament received when I was just a few months old, confirmed when I was just beginning to understand, was already a “choice for Christ” that became definitive every day (I emphasize “every day”) since I began to receive the Eucharist daily. I was far away, but Christ had not abandoned me. He “chased” me a little, because his wooing had not yet conquered my resistance. But why, then, seek another consecration? Why was Baptism not more satisfying to me?

I did not reflect further about it: I thought that, if so many friends whom I greatly esteemed had chosen this life, it was good “in itself.” That was enough for me to “risk it.” But...

IT'S TRUE, IT'S NOT ENOUGH

Our consecration does not come through a sacrament, like Matrimony or Holy Orders. It is the explicit and binding promise (vows and promises are those that we profess) to live the Gospel *radically*. Baptism also commits one to live the “good life of the Gospel.” A person who is consecrated in lay life is committed, but in a categorical and explicit way, to be a transparent witness to the Gospel without there being exterior “signs” except in the daily witness of one’s life.

The Gospel is the *root/radix* of our life; we live in awareness that the vital fluid that makes us active is nothing other than the Word. Even for religious, for all the other forms of consecration, this is so; but the other forms are “open”; ours is in a certain sense “hidden” because we live it with reserve about our belonging. This requires us to cling still more to the Gospel, which is also our on-going judge.

Lay consecration cannot be classified with “more” or “less” or “instead” or even by “lack” of something. It is an original form of service to the Lord in the neighbor and with the neighbor. If this requirement of giving witness without boundaries has always run through the Church, it has become an unavoidable necessity in times of secularization, of “no more widespread Christianity” as is true today.

Above all in times when awareness of lay tasks has become more clear and precise, Baptism is not enough, at least for some whom the Lord probably desires to have speaking with the world’s words, without being in its grip, with continuing discernment.

Above all with the Second Vatican Council which clarified (but maybe not enough) the lay position in the Church (the Word entrusted by the Lord to all the baptized; the Church defined as the “People of God,” a pilgrim people within the world’s circumstances, no longer considered perverse, and thus a pathway), the presence of men and women committed to witness the “good life of the Gospel” simply and responsibly in daily life, it may be an unavoidable necessity.

Baptism is not enough because “we are a stiff-necked people”; maybe pride, ignorance, timidity, are always ambushing us. To be faithful to all that we have promised, once for all (to conform our life to the evangelical counsels) even if some renew their vow and promises year by year, I think that all this means a more explicit commitment: explicit for us, although the rest of the world generally is not aware of our membership.

Baptism is not enough because we must always know how to discern when reserve – instead of being a positive tool for acting within our circumstances with complete freedom and honesty – has become a shield: if our belonging were known, perhaps we would undergo martyrdom. It doesn’t necessarily have to be “to the shedding of blood,” but it consists of all

those little obstacles, all that little nastiness or even blackmail (“But you belong to the Church...”) that people must sometimes undergo (as much as possible) for their fidelity to the Gospel.

Baptism is not enough because every day we need to convert our lives according to the Gospel, because the Gospel is our mirror, our judge: this is required of all the baptized, but it seems to me that it is required of us “more,” precisely because privately we render an account to the Lord and to our own consciences and to the community to which we belong, but also in our social context where we are called to evangelize precisely on the strength of our commitment. Consecration with all that follow from it, including reserve, is solely for the purpose of announcing the “good news.” Not merely disciples, we are apostles.

Baptism is not enough because our total immersion in life, in history, may be for us immersion in a holy life, in a sacred history: life and history are sacred because we believe in a God who became history, living in history with us. We may be committed to be witnesses to the power of the Incarnation inside the worldliness of the world. It is not an easy vocation, especially today, not only because of the obvious secularization, but also because it is not part of the dominant culture.

Baptism is not enough to be poor and obedient today as following the Gospel calls for. Poverty and obedience today are surely difficult “counsels” to follow. However, this is poverty for us: sometimes we think of it is only economic; but poverty is also not being self-sufficient, for example, in control of our lives.... This is obedience: not thinking about hoarding, but recognizing that we’re not self-sufficient. And our liberty bumps up against another person’s liberty, but it is always exercised with charity. Poverty and obedience go hand in hand.

Baptism is not enough to live chastely. For the third evangelical counsel, chastity, may paradoxically be helped today by a culture that has overdosed on sex and has taken to valuing chastity positively, and even virginity. But so the axis of the problem has shifted: the conversation is now about valuing our bodily nature positively, about realizing that love is not an abstract sentiment, but that imposes a duty on all of us, even on our bodies. It means not to scorn our bodies, but to bless them as gifts from God, who chose to have a body through the Incarnation; it means to think about the body as being glorified in our resurrection. It means to love and to bear witness to love, not to deny it. Mere self-denial is not an appreciation of chastity.

In support of what I have said about the evangelical counsels, I recall Pope Paul VI's words for the anniversary celebration of *Provida Mater* in 1972: "...the evangelical Counsels which you follow (as do members of other forms of consecrated life) take on a new meaning, they come to mean something very topical and typical in today's world: *Chastity* comes to mean being a living model of self-control, life in the spirit, stretching toward heavenly things, in a world which has no thought but for itself, no rein or brake on its instincts. *Poverty* tells the world where we stand with created goods, and the use we make of them: your attitude in this matter is the true one both for the highly developed countries, where the anxiety to possess is such a threat to Gospel values, and for the countries which have fewer resources. Here your poverty is the sign of your solidarity; you are with your brothers in their trials. *Obedience* becomes witness of the humble acceptance of the Church's mediation and, in general, of God's wisdom governing the world through created causes; today in the modern crisis of authority, your obedience becomes witness to the Christian order of the universe."

Baptism is not enough to bear witness to a “just” relationship with power which is being exercised in justice, for peace. We must be exemplary in this: not because we are “special,” but because consecration rightly joins responsibility with responsibility for all. Here lies the meaning of our existence and the reason why Baptism is not enough.

Baptism is not enough, for men and women today, to stand up to the many aspects of the so-called dominant culture, for example, regarding the dignity of women, the challenge of “femicide” and the violations that appear in the news every day, at least in Italy; thus the need for a profound change in our primarily masculine culture. By the way, I am still very disappointed by the fact that the Italian initiative titled “If not now, when?” lacked the witness of consecrated lay people. This witness on behalf of women and against violence, for which even two women religious gave public testimony, was a direct undertaking of USMI, an organization coordinated by major superiors. I would say that consecrated lay women’s absence was the more serious – but men’s too. I was told that this “absence” resulted from the necessity of reserve and that among the very many women (and also many men) gathered in the piazza there were probably consecrated lay persons too. To me this seemed like a pretty weak excuse: many of us, through our ecclesial commitment, are already amply recognized and recognizable. A direct testimony could have given further strength and could have evangelized also within what would become the movement “If not now when?” (Recalling the famous novel by Primo Levi? Who knows....)

The venerable Paul VI also pointed out that Baptism is not enough in *A new and original form of consecration* – Statement to the General Superiors of Secular Institutes (September 20, 1972):

“You stand at the confluence of two powerful streams of Christian life and your own life is enriched by both. You are

lay people, **consecrated as lay people by baptism and confirmation**, but you have chosen to underline your consecration to God with the profession of the evangelical counsels, accepted as binding, and the bond is firm and enduring and recognized by the Church. You are still lay people, committed to the secular values of the lay state of life (*Lumen Gentium*, 31), but with you it is a matter of ‘consecrated secularity’... you are consecrated seculars.... But there is a difference between your situation and that of 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 Gospel beatitudes.**”

IN THE WORDS OF THE POPES

As the words of Paul VI above demonstrate, **Baptism is not enough** to be really what the Lord, the Gospel transmitted through the magisterium, asks us to be. Some citations from the words directed to us, especially by Paul VI, but also by Blessed John Paul II (who convoked a synod in 1987 on “Vocation and mission in the Church and the world twenty years after the Second Vatican Council” after which the apostolic letter *Dignity of woman* was issued in August 1988) and the apostolic exhortation *Christifideles laici* in December 1988), and by Benedict XVI, seem to be to be fundamental for us, words to keep always tied onto ourselves like the phylacteries of observant Jews (and justifying our choice of “Baptism is not enough”).

Paul VI – Discourse to the first international meeting of secular institutes (September 26, 1970)

“You are welcome indeed and specially welcome because [your distinct place in the Church is] unrecognized by the world.... And you have chosen, for many reasons of your own, well weighed. You have made your decision to remain

secular, to continue to be 'just like everybody else' in the passing show of this world. Then comes the choice of this or that sort of life in the world and here you have, in full accord with the pluralism allowed to Secular Institutes, made your own decisions according to individual preference.... Both kinds of Institute [religious and secular] have the one end in view, Christian perfection. You for your part have made a choice which does not cut you off from this world with all its desacralized life and worldly scale of values, its moral principles often threatened by pressure of temptation, enough to make a man tremble. Discipline, moral discipline, eternal vigilance, is what you need: you must be fending for yourselves all the time: the plumb line straightness of your every act must come from your sense, your realization of the consecration you have made, and this for twenty-four hours of every day. 'Going without and putting up with' is a catch phrase of the moralist. This is what you will have to do all the time. It is a feature of your 'spirituality'.... You are spiritual mountaineers with a stiff climb before you.... Never forget that as members of a Secular Institute you have this mission in the modern world. The world needs you today; it needs in the world itself, pathfinders to salvation in Christ."

Paul VI - Presence and transformative action at the center of the world (on the 25th anniversary of *Provida Mater Ecclesia* – February 2, 1972)

"What was the soul of Secular Institutes, inspiring their birth and development? It was a longing, a search, deep and preoccupying, for a synthesis, a way of life combining the two characteristic features of your way of life: 1) full consecration according to the evangelical counsels and 2) complete responsibility for a presence and transforming action in the world, from the inside, to shape it, to make it a better world, to sanctify it. On the one hand the profession of the evangelical counsels is a specific form of life, giving both strength and

witness to that holiness which is the vocation of all the faithful. It is a sign of perfect identification with the Church, and with the Lord and Master himself and with the aims and purposes which he has entrusted to the Church. On the other hand, to reside in the world implies the Christian responsibility of men and women who, themselves redeemed by Christ, are therefore committed to ‘illumine and organize temporal affairs in such as to...develop and prosper according to Christ's mind, to the praise of the Creator and the Redeemer’ (*Lumen Gentium*, 31). In this picture of the present situation there is a deep, providential, unmistakable link - you might say identification - between the charism of Secular Institutes and one of the clearest and most important themes of the Council, **the Church's presence in the world**. In fact the Council documents underline the various relationships between Church and world: the Church is part and parcel of the world, destined to serve the world, to be the leaven in the lump or the soul in the body, for the Church is called to sanctify and consecrate the world, to shed upon it the pure light of the supreme values of love, justice and peace.”

To my thinking, Paul VI is the “pope of secular institutes,” because he spoke original words about them. He gleaned – as even these brief quotations demonstrate – the *soul* of the institutes, their heart. But also their mind, emphasizing the priority and the specific reality consecrated lay life, differentiating it from every other type of consecration. He also took account of the fact that there are secular institutes for the clergy (and here I might also like to ask: “But aren’t Holy Orders enough...?). Successors of Paul VI also weighed in, reprising in great part the affirmations and considerations of Paul VI, but bringing in some important stipulations.

John Paul II – Changing the world from the inside - Discourse addressed to the Second International Congress of Secular Institutes (August 28, 1980)

“... Your state of consecrated life is a special gift of the Holy Spirit given to our times to help us ... ‘to cope with the tension between objective openness to the values of the modern world (the authentic secular Christian attitude) and the complete and unreserved gift of the heart to God (spirit of consecration).’ **You actually live in the thick of the fight, the conflict which stirs and sunders men's souls today. That is why you can give ‘a really helping hand in forward-looking pastoral work. You can open new roads, roads which are right for all men and women of the people of God throughout the world.’** ... In these matters lay people have duties which are their own and no-one else's, as I have said and repeated and stressed times without number, and of course this is just what the Council teaches.... Yes, lay people are ‘a chosen race, a holy priesthood.’ They too are called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.’ It is their vocation and their proper mission to show the Gospel in their life and to put it like leaven into the world of today, the world in which they live and work. Among the great forces which rule the world - politics, mass media, science, technology, culture, education, industry, organized labor - this is exactly where lay people are specialized missionaries working on their own ground. If these forces **are directed by people who are true disciples of Christ and competent – by know-how and talent – in their own fields**, then the world will really be changed from within by the redemptive power of Christ.”

John Paul II – Spreading the work of redemption in the world while walking the evangelical way of the cross - Discourse to the Fourth World Congress of Secular Institutes (August 26, 1988)

“You are aware of sharing with all people the dignity of being God's children, Christ's living members, incorporated into the Church, invested through Baptism with the common priesthood of the faithful. However, you have also accepted the

message intrinsically connected with this dignity: that of the commitment to holiness, to the perfection of love; **that of answering the call of the evangelical counsels which consists of a gift of self to God and to Christ with an undivided heart and total abandonment to the will and guidance of the Spirit.** You fulfill this commitment, not by being separated from the world, but from within the complex situations of work, culture, the professions, and social services of every kind.”

John Paul II – On the Consecrated Life – Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Consecrated Life and its mission in the Church and in the World (March 25, 1996) - n. 10

“Through their own specific blending of presence in the world and consecration, they seek *to make present in society the newness and power of Christ's Kingdom*, striving to transfigure the world from within by the power of the Beatitudes. In this way, while they belong completely to God and are thus fully consecrated to his service, their activity in the ordinary life of the world contributes, by the power of the Spirit, to shedding the light of the Gospel on temporal realities. Secular Institutes, each in accordance with its specific nature, thus help to ensure that the Church has an effective presence in society.”

From *Vita Consecrata*, I want to bear in mind also n. 50 (A constant dialogue animated by charity), n. 52 (Communion among different institutes), n. 53 (Coordinating body), n. 54 (Communion and collaboration with lay people), n. 55 (For renewed spiritual and apostolic energy), n. 57 (The dignity and role of consecrated women [a theme particularly dear to me]), n. 78 (Present in every corner of the world), n. 97 (The necessity of renewed commitment in the field of education), and finally n. 99 (Presence in the world of social communications [another topic particularly dear to me]).

Benedict XVI – Discourse to participants in the world conference of secular institutes (February 3, 2007)

“Sixty years have passed, as has already been said, since that 2 February 1947, when my Predecessor Pius XII promulgated this Apostolic Constitution, thereby giving a theological and juridical basis to an experience that matured in the previous decades and recognizing in Secular Institutes one of the innumerable gifts with which the Holy Spirit accompanies the Church on her journey and renews her down through all the ages. That juridical act was not the goal but rather the starting point of a process that aimed to outline a new form of consecration.... You are here today to continue to mark out that path plotted 60 years ago, which sees you as increasingly impassioned messengers in Jesus Christ of the meaning of the world and of history. Your fervor is born from having discovered the beauty of Christ and of his unique way of loving, healing and meeting the needs of life and of enlivening and comforting it.... Indeed, it is the mystery of the Incarnation that makes your integration in human events a place of theology: (‘God so loved the world that he gave his only Son’ [Jn 3: 16]). The work of salvation was not wrought in opposition to the history of humankind but rather in and through it.” [Later I will pick up this interesting concept again.]

This is merely a pale synthesis of what Paul VI said to us. As I have already emphasized, he was the most attentive, original, pointed “exegete” of consecrated laity; and then much has been said by the last popes (and surely Pope Francis will be able to enrich this canvas in the future).

Baptism is not enough, among other things, to be what we must be in the mind of the Lord and in the situation of the Church “*semper reformanda*. ”

Laity, the presence of women in the Church and of their ministry...are problems in part (I think in good part) still on the table. The Second Vatican Council has pointed out the road,

has opened doors with many of its important documents. We think of many passages from *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, that are “quasi specific” about defining laity and the position of lay people. But we think also of *Dei Verbum*, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (requiring the laity’s “active participation” in the liturgy). I am not here to cite the various “numbers” that we all know.



Baptism is not enough to have the sense of responsibility – personal and connected with our vocational community – toward what the Council said but is not yet implemented, especially and in no

small part regarding the laity. And to open all those new pathways that the Council gave us a glimpse of. If our vocation still makes sense, I think it may be in this very task implicitly entrusted by the Savior and by his Church through the voice of the magisterium.

The Council, then, was occupied more particularly with secular institutes. Here I recall in *Lumen Gentium* nn. 43, 44, 46, and 47; in *Ad Gentes* n. 40 and in *Perfectae Caritatis* n. 11; all recommendations that contribute to further deepening the sense and scope of the presence of these institutes. It is necessary to go, then, to search for the goals on which our specific responsibility is based in the confrontations of lay life, in the confrontations of that “ecclesiology of communion” that the Council entrusted to us, as John Paul II recalled in the apostolic exhortation *Christifideles laici* in n. 19:

“The ecclesiology of *communion* is a central and fundamental concept in the conciliar documents.... What, then,

does this complex word '*communion*' mean? Its fundamental meaning speaks of the union with God brought about by Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit. The opportunity for such *communion* is present in the Word of God and in the Sacraments. Baptism is the door and the foundation of *communion* in the Church. The Eucharist is the source and summit of the whole Christian life (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 11). The Body of Christ in the Holy Eucharist sacramentalizes this communion, that is, it is a sign and actually brings about the intimate bonds of *communion* among all the faithful in the Body of Christ which is the Church (1 Cor 10:16).... The meaning of the Church is a communion of saints. 'Communion' speaks of a double, life-giving participation: the incorporation of Christians into the life of Christ, and the communication of that life of charity to the entire body of the Faithful, in this world and in the next, union with Christ and in Christ, and union among Christians, in the Church.... *The reality of the Church as Communion* is, then, the integrating aspect, indeed *the central content of the 'mystery'*, or rather, the divine plan for the salvation of humanity. For this purpose ecclesial communion cannot be interpreted in a sufficient way if it is understood as simply a sociological or a psychological reality. The Church as *Communion* is the 'new' People, the 'messianic' People, the People that 'has, for its head, Christ... as its heritage, the dignity and freedom of God's Children... for its law, the new commandment to love as Christ loved us... for its goal, the kingdom of God... established by Christ as a communion of life, love and truth'."

It is my strong conviction that the value and the sense of the presence of secular institutes today consists in this: to bring about an authentic Church – a communion of saints. To this end we must exert ourselves to be a "laboratory." But we will speak of that this afternoon.

CONSECRATED LAITY: TRULY THE “LABORATORY” DREAMED OF BY PAUL VI?

Marisa Sfrondrini, Journalist

On August 25, 1976, the Venerable Paul VI, in a discourse to secular institutes titled “A living presence for service to the world and the Church,” declared:

“4. If they remain faithful to their specific vocation, Secular Institutes will become, as it were, ‘the experimental laboratory’ in which the Church tests the concrete ways of her relations with the world.... The specific field of their evangelizing activity is the vast and complicated world of politics, social matters, economy, but also culture, sciences and arts, international life and the mass media.” [Referring here to the words of *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 70].

Paul VI was already participating from the outset in a clear way on secular institutes, on their tasks, on the specific characteristics also in comparison with consecrated religious. I continue to report some points from various speeches of this pope that seem interesting to me for the question in the title: do we want to be and are we or aren’t we a “laboratory”? And if so, what could our being a “laboratory” consist of? Also: if not, why not? In this sense, what Paul VI said on September 20, 1976, seems particularly significant:

“Your existential and sociological situation becomes your theological reality, and your path to accomplish and bear witness to salvation....”

This second affirmation is typical of Paul VI and of the conciliar ecclesiology that values the reality previously considered “profane.” On the strength of the Incarnation: the

God in whom we believe is a God who enters into human history, who becomes history, blessing this history that thus becomes sacred history, despite all its contradictions.

SOME BITS FROM PAUL VI

Here I report some bits from speeches by Montini, in chronological order. I think that the recommendations of this extraordinary and wise man serve us as “litmus paper” in judging whether we are a “laboratory” or not.

September 26, 1970 – Apostolic efficacy depends on personal sanctification – At the first international meeting of secular institutes

This is the first and perhaps the most substantive speech by Paul VI on secular institutes. It is also one of the most complex. On the basis of a proclamation by the Second Vatican Council, which had closed five years earlier and was still in a delicate phase of implementation, the pope touched upon a central theme, personal sanctification. (Already the Council had repeated that the Church wanted us to be “all saints.”) I think this one of the most edifying and at the same time compelling discourses by a pope. Here are no juridical-canonical explanations about a state of life, but rather spiritual and subjective explanations for the various communities commissioned for service in the Church and in society.

“**3. ... we will not give you a simple replay of a record so competently made by you yourselves. If we must add a word of our own in this canonical context we prefer to speak, in the light of all the circumstances and without dramatizing the subject, about the psychological and spiritual aspects of your special form of dedication to the following of Christ.**

“**5. First of all, note the importance of conscious acts, acts of which you can say that you watch yourself doing them: they mean a lot to us Christians: they are quite fascinating, especially in youth and adolescence when they can decide the**

shape of things. We call these acts, done with self-awareness, *conscience*, and everyone knows very well the meaning and value of conscience..... We ask you to think only, for a moment, of the unique point of everybody's experience at which psychological conscience, that is, self-awareness, becomes moral conscience (cf. St. Thomas I, 79, 13) as it adverts to the cogency of a law proclaimed interiorly, written on the heart, but binding in external conduct, in real life, with an accountability beyond the human scene and, at its topmost point, a rapport with God himself. It has then become religious conscience.... 'Man truly has a law written by God within his heart; to give obedience to this law constitutes his dignity, and he will be judged by it (cf. *Rom* 2.14-16). **Conscience is the most secret kernel and shrine of man, where he is alone with God.**' ...

“6. In conscience, this first stage of acts of self-awareness, is born the senses of accountability, of personality, man becomes aware of who and what he is and what it all means and demands. Following up this line of reflection in the light of the effects of baptism a Christian first gets the idea, deep and firm, of a theology of man, a theology of human beings who know they are children of God, members of Christ, incorporated into the body which is the Church, marked with priesthood of the faithful. From this pregnant doctrine of common priesthood recalled to our attention by Vatican II (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 10-11) comes the common Christian commitment to holiness (cf. *ibid.* 39-40) to the fullness of Christian life and to perfect charity.

“7. This same **conscience**, this commitment, was for you, at a given moment of time, lit up by a glorious grace from God: conscience and commitment were transferred into vocation, vocation was to a total response: to a true, unreserved profession of the evangelical counsels or the priesthood (and in either case the **interior magnet is perfection**); **vocation to**

consecration, your soul's way of self-giving to God, supreme act of will and abandonment. Conscience has become an altar of sacrifice. 'Let my conscience,' says St. Augustine, 'be your altar' (En. in *Ps* 4 9; P.L. 36, 578): it mirrors the '*Fiat*' of the Annunciation.. ...

"8. ... Then your baptismal consecration of grace awakes and speaks its conscious word of actual and chosen consecration, deliberately opening out to the evangelical counsels, stretching out to Christian perfection. This is the first, the capital decision, the qualifying decision, deciding what the whole of your life will be like.

"9. And what is your second decision? The second decision is the new thing, the original contribution of Secular Institutes. What is it then, actually? What is your chosen way of living this consecration of yours? It is like this you say: 'Shall we give up our life in the world, as we know it, or can we stay as we are?' The Church replies: 'Choose. You may do either.'

And you have chosen, for many reasons of your own, well weighed. You have made your decision to remain secular, to continue to be 'just like everybody else' in the passing show of this world. Then comes the choice of this or that sort of life in the world and here you have, in full accord with the pluralism allowed to Secular Institutes, made your own decisions according to individual preference. Secular, then, are your Institutes, as distinct from the Religious

"10. Both kinds of Institute have the one end in view, Christian perfection. You for your part **have made a choice** which does not cut you off from this world with all its desacralized life and worldly scale of values, its moral principles often threatened by pressure of temptation, enough to make a man tremble.

"11. A **vast field of work** lies open before you. Here your twofold purpose is to be achieved, your own sanctification, and 'consecration of the world'. This fascinating commitment calls for perceptiveness and tact. The **world which is your field** is a

world of human beings: restless, real, dazzling. It has its virtues and its passions, its opportunities for good, its gravitation to evil, its magnificent modern achievements, the inadequacies underneath it all, its inevitable sufferings. **You are walking on an inclined plane.** It would be easy to go down, it is hard work to go up, but a challenge.

“**12.** You are spiritual mountaineers with a stiff climb before you.

“**13.** Keep three things in mind. First **your consecration is not only a commitment, it is also a help, a support; love it, it is a blessing and gives joy to your heart, you can turn to it always: it fills up the voids which your self-denial scoops out of your human life, it is compensation, it makes you able to realize the paradox of charity: giving, giving to others means receiving, in Christ.** Second, you are in the world, and not of the world, but **for the world.** Our Lord has taught us how to find in this play on words both his and our mission for the salvation of the world. Never forget that as members of a Secular Institute you have a **mission of salvation** to fulfill for the modern world. The world needs you today; it needs in the world itself, pathfinders to salvation in Christ.

“**14.** The third thing ever to be borne in mind is the Church. Church enters into you as part of the awareness, the conscience, which we have just been thinking about. It becomes part of your mind, a continual meditation, your *sensus Ecclesiae*, your ‘feel of the Church.’ It is within you, the air which your spirit breathes. ... You belong to the Church by a **special title:** consecrated seculars. The Church has every confidence in you; we want you to be quite clear on this point. The Church follows your progress, supports you, accepts you as belonging to the family, favorite children, active responsible members loyal, yet trained for flexible mission, ready for silent witness, for service and, when required, for sacrifice. **You are in fact lay people** whose open profession of Christianity is a

constructive force, supporting both mission and structure, giving life to the charity, the spiritual life of the diocese and especially of Catholic institutions. **You are lay people** who can know at first hand, better than others, the needs of the Church on earth, and perhaps you are better placed to see its defects: these you do not take as an opportunity for biting, ungracious criticism, an excuse for standing aloof, a disdainful elite. They only serve to bring out in you a greater love, a humbler and more filial service as sons and daughters coming to her aid. You - secular Institutes of today's Church!"

February 2, 1972 – Presence and transformative action at the center of the world – On the 25th anniversary of Provida Mater Ecclesia (February 2, 1972)

In this discourse Paul VI spells out the difficulties of the Church in a changing world and also the difficulties of people who think they are self-sufficient. We recall the position of the Council that has listened to the silent cry of humanity, involved in its self-referential attitude. And he “assigns” to secular institutes the task of responding to this cry with its own original way of being present. We also recall the fact that it belongs to secular institutes to transmit to the Church what I would call “the spirit of incarnation.” What the pope pointed out seems particularly interesting to me: it was then – and still is – necessary to incarnate the spirit of the Council.

“8. A new world is rising: people are looking for new forms of thought and action which will determine their life in the centuries to come. The world believes that it can stand on its own feet and has no need of divine grace or the Church in its self-development and expansion: a tragic **divorce has come about between faith and life, between the two lines of progress, technology and faith in the living God....** The Church of Vatican II has not been deaf to this ‘voice of the times’; ...conscious of her own nature as ‘the universal sacrament of salvation.’ the Church sees the impossibility of

human fulfillment without grace, that is, without the Word of God who is ‘the goal of human history, the focal point of the longings of history and of civilization, the centre of the human race, the joy of every heart, and the answer to all its yearnings’ (*Gaudium et spes*, 45).



9. At a time like the present [and perhaps also our time?], Secular Institutes, in virtue of their charism

of consecrated secularity (cf. *Perfectae caritatis*, 11), **have emerged as providential instruments to embody this spirit and to pass it on to the whole Church.** Their life, even before the Council, was a kind of forging ahead in this matter, and that is the best of reasons today for giving witness as specialists in the field as models, of the **Church's attitude and mission in the world. Clear directives and repeated instructions are not enough, as things stand today, to accomplish those changes in the Church which are needed in today's world. We need the realities of person and community, people who embody and transmit consciously and responsibly the spirit of the Council. This is the mission given to you – to be a model of untiring inward energy towards the new relationship to the world, to service of the world, which the Church seeks to embody.**

September 20, 1972 – A new and original form of consecration – To general superiors of secular institutes

In this talk, Paul VI makes a fundamental affirmation: our existential and sociological [not ecclesial] condition is our theological reality that makes us the advance wing of the Church in the world. The pope is the one who led and pursued to its conclusion that Council which had never as arrived first has emphasized the dimension of service of the Church to the world in the style of the “washing of feet.” The pope is the one who explicitly and implicitly – maybe more than others – realizes the mystery and the burden for the baptized to bear witness to the Incarnation.

“12. ...Your existential and sociological situation becomes your theological reality and your path to accomplish and bear witness to salvation.... In this way you are an advance wing 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 entrusted mainly to the laity. You are a clear, tangible, telling proof of what the Church sets out to do for the building of the world envisioned in *Gaudium et spes*.”

THE SPEECHES OF THE OTHER POPES

As already stated, Paul VI's successors John Paul II and Benedict XVI also spoke about secular institutes, their vocation and their service, always referring explicitly to what Pope Montini had said. John Paul II especially insisted on the fact that consecrated lay persons are “Disciples of Christ who work to change the world from the inside: (Discourse addressed to the Second International Congress of Secular Institutes – August 28, 1980). He also insisted on the fact that secular institutes are “a faithful expression of the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council” (address to the plenary Assembly of the Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes – May 6, 1983). And the blessed Polish pope insisted on the fact that it

belongs to consecrated lay persons to “animate temporal reality with the spirit of the Gospel” (Discourse to the Third International Congress of Secular Institutes – August 28, 1984), spreading in the world “the work of redemption by walking the evangelical way of the cross” (Discourse to the Fourth World Congress of Secular Institutes – August 26, 1988).

Benedict XVI, in his discourse of February 3, 2007, to the participants in the World Conference of Secular Institutes, mentioned – in the sense already indicated at the beginning – the reason for calling the presence of consecrated lay people in the world their “theological place”:

“Indeed, it is the mystery of the Incarnation that makes your integration in human events a place of theology: (‘God so loved the world that he gave his only Son’, Jn 3: 16). The work of salvation was not wrought in opposition to the history of humankind but rather in and through it. In this regard, the *Letter to the Hebrews* notes: ‘In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son’ (1: 1-2a). This redeeming act was itself brought about in the context of time and history, and implies obedience to the plan of God inscribed in the work that came from his hands.... In this way, 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 fulfillment: from politics to the economy, from education to the commitment to public health, from the management of services to scientific research.” The theologian pope mentioned the special relationship with the Lord that must be established by one who is consecrated in lay life:

“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 these 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....” The **secular nature** of your consecration **brings to the fore, on the one hand, the means you use to fulfill 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.



ARE WE OR ARE WE NOT A “LABORATORY”?

At the beginning I posed three questions, to which I will use my wits to answer, according to my life experience, my sensibility, my limited competence.

Meanwhile let us see what “laboratory” means. According to the Italian dictionary, a laboratory is a “locale or complex of locales designated for scientific research.” I emphasize the expression “scientific research.” If we should be a “laboratory,” we are a place of “scientific” research even for ourselves. And we are simultaneously “researchers” and “guinea pigs.” Being researchers requires certain skills: the first important point is “**permanent formation**,” a concept that became familiar to the whole People of God, especially in the post-conciliar period. In a special way to all the formal groups of the baptized: associations, movements, orders and religious congregations, etc.

“Permanent formation” for us is not only an intellectual fact but a fact of life. It is a requirement of our vocation. (We remember what Benedict XVI said in the first quotation: the development of secular consecration, a profound relationship with discerning the signs of the times, etc.)

I feel a profound necessity, today, that we be present in the world as lay, in daily life and in the circumstances of our presence and service – especially within the ecclesial community – the “laity value.” Said in this way, it’s easy to raise the challenge: But aren’t we already living this way? It is my impression that from the Council till today, much has been written and spoken about the laity (not to be confused with laicism, dechristianization, secularization, socio-cultural phenomena so present today), reclaiming the concepts, though maybe in a different modality. In the local church there may be a rejection of clericalism, which has even infected lay people. In sacristies there are more mini-priests than true lay people disposed to serve humbly but also competently. A diocesan assistant director of Catholic Action (the lay group that still today in Italy, though rather diminished in numbers and in importance, is more present in the conversation on laity) sadly confessed to me that he had to acknowledge how this very sense of the value and the evangelical tasks of lay people was under-appreciated even among members of that association. “It seems that they are afraid,” he told me dejectedly.

Remember that the Italian Catholic Action was in the past a great “trainer” of lay people and a great “source” for lay consecration (especially for women, thanks to the women’s Youth group in Catholic Action, founded at the pope’s command by Ven. Armada Barelli, foundress of a secular institutes, along with Fr. Agostino Gemelli). She recalled in a private conversation with the Servant of God Giuseppe Lazzati that the training received in Catholic Action at times even inculcated “like a hammer” had permitted him and many of his

companions in prison to “remain on their feet even in the concentration camp.”

The other lay groups and/or movements in Italy, too (some also flourishing outside the boundaries of Italy – some of them important) were occupied with the training of their members, but I think not with the same commitment as Catholic Action in the past. (Today, unfortunately, even Catholic Action has been adapted a little to the current trend: the concern of the assistant cited above), in a way that I judge too “clerical” or “clergy-dependant.”

The late lamented Fr. Carlo Maria Martini (Cardinal-archbishop of Milan) in his last interview with Fr. Sporschill, declared, “The Church is 200 years behind the times.” This is a bitter realization, that I think has to be shared also in the life of our institutes: We are not “200 years behind,” but we are behind in developing formation for giving credible witness to lay life inside the Church experienced in love, humility, skill, perseverance, and a great sense of responsibility, a lay life openly recognized by being entrusted with true responsibility for clear-cut “ministries” (not clericalized). We also need to develop a formation that renders us present in the world with all the love possible, as love was expressed in the Incarnation.

In this way we will be in “a profound relationship with the signs of the times” (cf. Benedict XVI) and therefore witnesses in the world as expressed in the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (December 8, 1975). Paul VI said in his discourse of August 25, 1976 (where he spoke of the “laboratory”): “Secular Institutes, in fact, are alive to the extent to which they take part in human history and bear witness, among the people of today, to God’s fatherly love (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 26)”. The exhortation says: “...to evangelize is first of all to bear witness, in a simple and direct way, to God revealed by Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit, to bear witness that in His Son God has loved

the world – that in His Incarnate Word He has given being to all things and has called men to eternal life” because, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* continues in n. 41, “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”

IF YES, IN WHAT COULD OUR BEING A “LABORATORY” CONSIST?

If today we do not feel – as perhaps at one time we ran the risk of feeling – that we are “diamond points” in the Church and in the world, we certainly do not even feel like guinea pigs that go through an experience and are at the same time the subject of experiment. All to become a “virus” that can infect the world and the Church with the “good life of the Gospel.”

In addition to permanent formation it is also necessary to have the courage to speak, to notice, to denounce what does not conform to the Gospel. Not for partisan reasons, but for love of truth; that makes us prudent (a necessity for confronting ourselves within our vocational community and in the coordinating body, as well as in our local ecclesial community) but also “denouncing” openly, ready to accept the consequences.

In the interview with Fr. Martini cited above, he said among other things: “The church is tired, in the Europe of well-being and in America. Our culture has become old, our churches and our religious houses are big and empty, the bureaucratic apparatus of the church grows, our rites and our dress are pompous. Do these things, however, express what we are today? ... Well-being weighs on us. We find ourselves like the rich young man who went away sad when Jesus called him to be his disciple. I know that we can't let everything go easily. At least, however, we can seek people who are free and closest to their neighbor, like Archbishop Romero and the Jesuit martyrs of El Salvador. Where are the heroes among us who

can inspire us? By no means do we have to limit them by the boundaries of the institution.”

Shouldn't we, “laboratory researchers and guinea pigs,” be in our little way these “free people, close to our neighbor”?

In the same interview, Martini asked himself, “How can we liberate the embers from the ash, to reinvigorate the fires of love? For the first thing, we have to seek out these embers. Where are the individuals full of generosity, like the Good Samaritan? Who have faith like the Roman centurion? Who are enthusiastic like John the Baptist? Who dare the new, like Paul? Who are faithful like Mary Magdalene? I advise the Pope and the bishops to seek out twelve people outside the lines for administrative positions, people who are close to the poorest, who are surrounded by young people, and who try new things.”

Shouldn't we – still in our little way – be these people “with the generosity of the Good Samaritan, enthusiastic like John the Baptist, daring like Paul and faithful like Mary of Magdala?

Martini, who was then close to death, fully aware of his condition, replied to the interviewer that he was searching for how the Church could overcome this tiredness: “I recommend three very strong ones. The first is conversion: the church must recognize its errors and follow a radical path of change... The second is the Word of God. Vatican II gave the Bible back to Catholics. Only those who perceive this Word in their heart can be part of those who will help achieve renewal of the church, and who will know how to respond to personal questions with the right choice. The Word of God is simple, and seeks out as its companion a heart that listens.... Who are the sacraments for? These are the third tool of healing. The sacraments are not an instrument of discipline, but a help for people in their journey and in the weaknesses of their life. Are we carrying the sacraments to the people who need new strength?”

When I read this interview, published in the *Corriere della Sera* after Cardinal Martini's death, I felt directly challenged as a baptized person and as a consecrated lay woman: who, if not consecrated lay people, should first give themselves to bring about the simple things that Martini pointed out? To be "laboratory," "guinea pig," "virus"...

In these ways, being true "spiritual mountaineers," our existential and sociological condition may indeed become our theological reality. At least it seems so to me.

IF NOT, WHY NOT?

Frankly, I do not find compelling motives for *not* being "laboratory," "guinea pigs," "virus." But for the sake of justice and truth, I like to look at the other side of the coin. Because all the positive tasks that we should carry out as worthy disciples of the Spirit and of the Gospel, can also have a negative side. Some of them we have already seen in passing: a kind of clericalization (we women used to be called "lay sisters," for example!!!); walling ourselves up in sacristies; refusing to be in dialogue with other cultures, even other religious experiences – a particularly detrimental attitude for people with political responsibilities or anyway in social circumstances; remaining closed as though in a cave (we may all be among ourselves, without seeming to disagree); rejecting people who "dare" to make statements that are judged to be "out of line" and "way out." Considering ourselves a "laboratory," etc., can make us feel "special," one step ahead, even in good faith. It can also make us run the risk of become relativistic, of giving into the lure of the majority cultures and that are attractive. Being in the world but not of the world, yet for the world is always risky.

Considering ourselves a "laboratory" can also make us lose the humility of knowing that in the laboratory an experiment can have either positive or negative results; we can

permit ourselves to have a critical attitude toward our community, toward our commitments. Considering ourselves a “laboratory” can make us feel indispensable to the Church and to the world: we are human instruments, therefore with a beginning and an end which will be when the Spirit makes us understand that the moment has come: it will be important to be humble enough to understand that the moment will come, without sheltering ourselves in the notion that we are indispensable. To be a “laboratory” also means accepting a certain precariousness and elasticity of thought and of action toward all the “chance happenings” in life. Can this be expected of all those who feel called to lay consecration? Couldn’t the precariousness of the laboratory become a motive for assuming a light attitude toward vows and promises (of the evangelical counsels)?

Again: being a “laboratory” can make us consider everything relative, even the Word, the sacraments.... We can also run the risk of entering into reality with our mind already fixated on the idea that even this may be a “laboratory” to be



changed, even devastated....

The doubts about our being a “laboratory” are also legitimate. I have expressed some of them that came to mind; there can be others.

IN CONCLUSION

I would like to put the last word to this morning’s presentation and this afternoon’s with some further words of Fr. Carlo Maria Martini, still from that final interview, which is considered his spiritual testament: “In any event, the faith is the foundation of the church. Faith, trust, courage. I’m old and sick, and I depend on the help of others. Good people around me make me feel their love. This love is stronger than the sentiment of distrust that I feel every now and then with regard to the church in Europe. Only love defeats exhaustion. God is love. Now I have a question for you: What can you do for the church?”

I turn the same question around to myself and to you: what can we do for the Church? This question is an opening to the future in complete trust in the Lord and his grace. It requires constant searching and discernment through continuing conversion and through the Word of God, the sacraments and commitment within the world, especially in the poorest and most abandoned situations. Being missionaries of the Gospel even in our city, our country.... Missionaries who look at the situations we encounter and of which we are a substantial part with the same love with which we look at the Crucified.

Christifideles laici: A Bridge between the Church and the World

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1. Background – Vatican II

The title of this talk, which I was asked to present for this gathering, echoes the apostolic exhortation signed by John Paul II in 1988. He issued this exhortation at the conclusion of the bishops' synod on the laity in the Church and the world, held in 1987, over twenty years after the Second Vatican Council. The central motif of that post-synodal exhortation was the invitation given in the Gospel parable of the workers sent to work in the vineyard, an invitation which is repeated insistently – at different times of day – now to some, now to others: “You too go into my vineyard” (Mt 20:4, 7).

The pope, summarizing the synod's discussions, explained that the vineyard is the Church and the world of today. All the baptized are responsible for this vineyard, and none can be dispensed from this responsibility. For the baptized laity this is translated into a service within the Church, expressed according to each one's particular spiritual charism and in different but complementary ministries meant for the well-being of the believing community. At the same time, and above all, this responsibility launches lay people back into the heart of the “world,” within the sphere that they – precisely as laity – have to participate in directly: the family, “where the duty to society begins” (CL 40); public life, which is “for everyone

and by everyone” (CL 42); the economy, where human rights and dignity must be repositioned at its very center (CL 43); and culture and cultures, which must continually be re-evangelized from within (CL 44).

Nonetheless, it remains clear that *Christifideles laici* took its cue from Vatican II, and Vatican II flows through its every page. Therefore, if something must be repeated regarding the “place” that baptized lay people have in the Church and in the world – and likewise between the Church and the world, a kind of “bridge” between them – then it is necessary to continue referring to the Council. Today there is even more reason to

refer to the Council, fifty years from the beginning of its work, inaugurated by John XXIII in 1962. Choosing this perspective helps put me in tune with the reflections that the other



speakers have made before me, continually referring to the experience and the teaching of the Council.

Here’s why, in beginning, it seems like a good idea to reecho some questions regarding the Council itself: this was indeed the Council of the Church (as so many commentators have said and written). If that was the case, which Church was being discussed? Further, if it can be said that the Council spoke clearly about both lay people and the laity per se, did this treatment include those lay persons who also live the

evangelical counsels as consecrated persons, while being and remaining lay?

These questions are not merely rhetorical. The Council's most innovative intuitions on the identity of the Church have remained only a slogan through the years of the post-conciliar period. Yet understanding the role of lay people who are within the Church and for whom the Church is a starting point, depends on this identity. Some hidden weaknesses in the conciliar discourse on lay people have perhaps only covered up crises of the traditional modes of lay associations within the Church. These weaknesses led to the loss of interpretive keys suited for correctly explaining the metamorphoses of the last

ten years
(including the
"originality"
of secular
institutes).

The many
meanings that
have
gradually
clustered



around terms like lay, lay person, laity, lay state, laicism [secularism] make them ever more ambiguous and, in the final analysis, no longer useful for debate within the Church or for dialogue among believers and secular humanists (as in the *Court of the Gentiles* held in Stockholm in September 2012, defined as atheist intellectuals and non-believers).

2. Two perspectives: A Trinitarian-agape origin and the relationship between the Church and the world

The Council's lesson, as far as it concerns the identity and role of baptized lay people, is really important. First of all,

because it is a lesson *about* lay people but not intended only *for* lay people, it therefore challenges *all* in the Church and spurs *all* to renew their own way of seeing and living their reality in the Church. Lay people are an integral part of it no less than other baptized members.

We find the most innovative pages about lay people in Chapter 4 of *Lumen Gentium*. This follows the discussion in Chapter 2 of the Church as the People of God, among whom all the baptized hold citizenship – with equal claim – without exclusion or partiality. It has been rightly noted that this progressive conciliar teaching concludes by emphasizing the direct relationship that lay people in the Church have with Jesus Christ. He is the only head of a body composed of many members. The distinction among the members, and notably between the hierarchy of bishops and of other ordained ministers and the laity, follows and is secondary to that which unifies all in Christ.

Said another way, the structure of the conciliar teaching (Chapters 2 to 4) is already the clue to a fundamental equality between the hierarchy and the laity. This is because the identity of the laity does not proceed from being under the hierarchy, but from the shared dignity of all the People of God, completely constituted as “a kingdom and priests” (LG 10; cf. Revelations 1:6, 5:9-10; 1 Peter 2:4-10). That is, all belong to God in virtue of the sole mediation of Jesus Christ; through his mediation all recover their true place in relationship with God the Father, within a history that has already been redeemed. Baptism consecrates all in a common, shared priesthood that participates in the priesthood of Christ, no less than those who participate also in the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood.

In this sense, the question that was posed yesterday morning by Doctor Sfrondrini around the specific nature of a consecrated laity (“But isn’t Baptism enough?”) calls into

question not only consecrated laity, but also the existence of an “ordained” priesthood in the Church.

Perhaps it is just a case of clarifying that the common priesthood remains linked with the ministerial priesthood in a reciprocal “ordination” or direction. Thus, according to the Council, the common priesthood is organized in relationship to the ministerial priesthood and vice versa, in the sense that the ministerial priesthood must proceed from the common priesthood, and, in comparison with the common priesthood, it should make itself available through service. (There are no priests or bishops who were not first lay persons; their priesthood and episcopacy are nothing other than ecclesial service to lay people, according to their “function” of representing Christ.) At the same time, the common priesthood, to be what it truly is, should give rise to the ministerial priesthood and should allow the ministerial priesthood to be inserted into it, “agreeing to receive” (to use the words of Balthasar), and therefore, “receiving-taking,” with an active receptivity that typifies those in relationship with God.

I purposely linger over this teaching of LG 10 because it seems fundamentally relevant. It helps us dispose of the rhetoric that the laity is singled out in contrast with the hierarchy. On the contrary, according to the Council the laity is a true and proper priestly experience. (With the traits of both prophetic and priestly experience, the laity is also involved in the divine sacralization of the world. In the world this priesthood is exercised with the spiritual vigor of witness and with the ethical force of commitment within history.) Further, LG 10 helps us interpret the relationship between the laity and the hierarchy, esteeming their not-incompatible otherness according to a non-pyramidal logic.

To use a word severely criticized by Yves Congar, but which is in circulation: this is a “hierarchology” based on reciprocity. It is a type of agape, if (as LG 4 teaches) the

Church itself is truly a people called into being by the unity of the Three of the Trinity (“a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”). The Church *de Trinitate*, the Church that issues from the Trinity, that flows from the divine communion of agape, is constituted by the power of this same dynamic that constitutes the communion of



agape. That is, the Church exists in accordance with the interweaving of being and non-being. At this point the personal profiles of the Father, the

Son, and the Spirit are configured: the profile of the Father who is the Father but is not the Son; of the Son who is the Son but is not the Father, of the Spirit who is the Spirit of the Father and of the Son but is not the Father or the Son. Picking up this Trinitarian perspective of a union that is not reduced to uniformity, LG 32, refers to the relationship in the Church between lay people and ordained ministers or religious. It affirms that every distinction includes union, so that in the Church what is proper and exclusive to some does not threaten the others and actually helps the others be what they should be. Let me say at this point that the members of secular institutes really personify this distinction-that-includes-union, because – by an extraordinary paradox – they are not simply lay or simply religious, but are both lay and consecrated.

These fundamental intuitions are somewhat grouped and reaffirmed in all of Chapter 4 of LG, where (all) lay people are presented as the *cristifideles* that form the Church. They are what they are in reference to Jesus Christ, whose disciples they

are, to whom they are conformed, whose priestly, prophetic, and royal mission they share and participate in.

Truthfully, in the Church according to the Council, under this “Christic” profile all are *christifideles*. Among these, all who are not ordained ministers or religious are properly called *lay*. There is here a veiled echo of that definition “by a negative” that in the patristic era and then on through the Middle Ages defined lay people as the ones who are “not” clerics and “not” consecrated in a special way in religious life. A definition “by a negative,” with a juridical tone, was reechoed in the Code of Canon Law (canon 207). But this definition by negation, which would seem to debase the identity of lay people, can also have a value if understood beyond its canonical determinations and if it is connected to its perspective as a communion of agape.

LG 31 also offers, above all, a definition “by a positive” of a lay person, when it points out particular characteristics that do not delineate the lay vocation in opposition to the vocations of other members of the ecclesial community. Fundamentally LG 31 deals with what it calls “secular nature.” It explains the meaning of this expression like this: “The laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of 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 may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven.”

Determining the meaning of the “secular nature” proper to the lay person – in the post-conciliar period – has been a sort of interpretive key. Literally it refers to the reality of the world and therefore to the “worldliness” of the Church, that is to say,

to its relationship with the world understood in a historic sense. In this understanding, the Church, the whole Church, is situated within history; therefore secularity is one of its characteristics. This flows from the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word. From this perspective the Church is in the world and of the world, re-experiencing the same commitment to the world's existence that belonged to Jesus Christ, redeemer of the world. To speak specifically of the laity by singling out their secular nature seems to some commentators a rhetorical stretch, as though bishops, priests, monks, and sisters were not also responsible to be in the world and for the world.

Though recognizing the rationale of this observation, I consider that the Second Vatican Council may have suggested two irreconcilable criteria for interpreting the identity of the laity. The first criterion is evangelical and borrows from the Sermon on the Mount: the laity, stalwart in their secular nature, do not remain on the margins of the Church, least of all if they draw on it when outside it, going down into the trenches, the trenches of the world. They are the Church itself; with them and in them the Church lives out its mission of being the "leaven" of salvation, like leaven in the dough, giving it substance and flavor. They are the Church itself; in them the Church lives out its mission of being "present and operative in those places and circumstances where only through them can [the Church] become the salt of the earth" (LG 33).

The second criterion is a cornerstone of theological anthropology: according to the Council, by their specific vocation lay people are called to sanctify the world from within. This "from within" is not a purely earthly dimension. If the conciliar teaching is considered according to the logic of the Incarnation that permeates and supports it, the inside of the world, the starting point of the laity's call to devote themselves for the redemption of the world itself, is a precisely theological dimension. This is the place that God, in Jesus Christ, has

chosen for himself. This is the place where, transcending his very transcendence, he has graciously and gratuitously made himself present. In fact, the God of Jesus Christ is both on high and also within the world: not outside, and not even beneath the world. *On high* and *within* are asymmetrical poles: there is not a distance between them, as there could be between someone on high and someone down low, or between someone inside and someone outside. No, the One who is on high is also within. This must be said of the God of Jesus Christ. And it must also be said of the lay Christian. This means that lay people live a mission that is set in motion by God himself and as such is an authentic ecclesial mission, not an excuse or a substitute for mission.

It can easily be said, then that the whole Church is “secular.” Considering the relationship between the Church and the world, then, it can be said that the identifying factor of the clergy and religious is being in the world and for the world, starting out from inside the Church. Likewise, the identifying factor of the laity is their being in the world and for the world, starting out from inside the world itself, as LG 31 teaches.



A great theologian like Balthasar keeps all this in mind. In his book on the states of life of Chris-

tians, he emphasizes precisely that the identifying factor of clergy and religious is having – in the Church and for the Church – the function of representing Jesus Christ and the

radical requirements implied by being children of the Father (the evangelical counsels). Their identifying factor is of a “functional” type, as such destined to express itself in a “ministry” in respect to the laity. (The etymology of *ministry* suggests real “service” [Latin *munus*] and also a humble being-less-than [Latin *minus*]). If all this is true – and it is true – then the Church “is” not only clergy and religious and finally, by subtraction, the laity. The Church “is” precisely the laity and functionally, by ministry for them and among them, also the clergy and religious.

From this viewpoint it can be affirmed that baptized lay people are called to point out the traces of God in the world. Moreover, they are called to leave God’s footprints on the world. This does not mean for lay Christians to play a sacred role that does not belong to them. Rather it means to act in such a way that the world senses and understands that, in Christ, God takes care of it, wearing himself out, putting aside his divine prerogatives, the treasure of his equality with God.

The lay person is the one who lives the Gospel, reinterpreting it according to this incarnational logic: beginning with those pages where the Teacher from Nazareth, passing from village to village, announced the Reign of God and “cured” all the maladies that he encountered. In the Greek version of the Gospels we notice that the verb principally used by the evangelists to describe Jesus’ attitude to the sick is *terapeuo*, which means precisely to cure and, in our case, to take care of, without avoiding, without getting distracted, without turning away and also without resorting immediately to a miracle, without insisting on intervention from on high, because God is already here and is located inside of history.

Insisting on this point seems useful for understanding in what sense baptized lay people are – as Paul VI said in his speech to Catholic graduates on January 3, 1964 – a “bridge” between the Church and the world.

3. The originality of a vocation “at the border”

In this sense lay people are fully engaged in the relationship between the Church and the world, so that it can be said that the laity is a state typically secular, while – on the other hand – the consecration of religious stresses their experience in an eschatological perspective. But lay people should not misunderstand the eschatological orientation of consecrated religious, as though it dis-incarnated them and alienated them from the shared history of humanity. And the secular nature of the laity should not be misunderstood, either, as if this turned off all their yearning for transcendence. The challenge that consecrated people and lay people share is to live fully one of the two orientations of Christian life – incarnational or eschatological – and not under-appreciate the value of the other orientation.

To face such a challenge, God granted the Church of the Council the awareness that a distinct vocation exists which reminds the laity that secular immanence is always open to transcendence, and reminds the consecrated faithful that the transcendence of the God toward whom they stretch always breaks into secular immanence. Members of secular institutes live in the state of both secularity and consecration. While remaining fully lay, they also live a special, authentic consecration. In fact, their special consecration accentuates the transcendent orientation of baptismal consecration, visible among persons consecrated in the religious state.

But, at the same time, the Council treats the incarnational orientation that also belongs to baptismal consecration. Furthermore, it focuses on this new and special consecration and on the secular nature that the consecrated laity share with all the other lay faithful. Likewise, they make a radical commitment to the Gospel in and for the world, a responsibility

of every lay person. So, their charismatic vocation to live in the world as consecrated laity is expressed in the Church as the service of 1) reminding the lay faithful that they can and must live according to the evangelical counsels even in earthly reality, and 2) showing the consecrated faithful the impact within history of the Gospel beatitudes, which can transform and redeem the world and humanity's temporal life.

Finally, the characteristic that defines consecrated laity is living fully and contemporaneously the secular nature that belongs to their lay state and also the consecration of the counsels that belongs to the religious state. They are actually lay, but not only that. Moreover, they are authentically consecrated, without becoming religious. Their specific reality is that of synthesizing secularity and consecration. They do this by bearing witness fully and radically to the value of the one and the other. Both to other lay people and to other consecrated people they manifest the goal of "transfiguring the world from within by the power of the Beatitudes" (*Vita consecrata*, 10 and 32). The members of secular institutes, then, fulfill in the contemporary Church a vocation that serves as an example both to lay people and to consecrated people, since they share secularity with the first, living it as consecrated people, and they share a special consecration with the second, living it as lay people.

However, this vocation is not easy to understand or to live.



The Council itself had difficulty speaking about it, inserting the only meager allusion to consecrated laity in the decree dedicated to religious life, in n. 11 of *Perfectae*

caritatis: “Secular Institutes, although not religious institutes, involve a true and full profession of the evangelical counsels in the world.” And *Christifideles laici* did not get much further, if at all, reversing the Council’s viewpoint by grouping consecrated lay people no longer among religious but among the laity: “The Church’s rich variety is manifested still further from within each state of life. Thus *within the lay state diverse ‘vocations’ are given*, that is, there are different paths in the spiritual life and the apostolate which are taken by individual members of the lay faithful. In the field of a ‘commonly shared’ lay vocation, ‘special’ lay vocations flourish. In this area we can also recall the spiritual experience of the flourishing of diverse forms of secular institutes.... These offer the lay faithful, and even priests, the possibility of professing the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience through vows or promises, while fully maintaining one’s lay or clerical state” (n. 56).



One firm point stands out: that consecrated lay people are at the same time truly lay and fully consecrated. As lay people, they are *in* the world, participating in the historic situation of every human being; furthermore, they are *with* and *for* the world, since they share the secular commitment of each baptized lay person, remaining thus totally committed to “seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs” (LG 31) with the secular means proper to temporal reality. As consecrated persons they have the mission of practicing the evangelical spirit of the beatitudes in an

exemplary way. All lay people must feel motivated by the beatitudes to organize secular reality “according to God.”



As lay people, members of secular institutes must live the Gospel from inside the world (in, with, and for

the world) according to the incarnational logic of the Christ-event. Likewise, as consecrated persons they must also experience the yearning to open themselves unreservedly to encounter God, who reaches out to people while calling them to himself. Their vocation is not to abandon the world, since God is really present in the world so as to encounter humanity. Neither is it a matter of conforming to the world, but rather of going to meet God, always with the world as the starting point, and as if one is carrying the world itself. As consecrated persons they are called to uproot the world from their hearts to dispose themselves unconditionally to God; but as lay persons they are also called, in the heart of the world, to be identified by their awareness that, through them and for all, this world must be able to become the vast horizon of God. Their lifestyle is not flight from the world but exodus, with the world as their starting point, passing through the world, and together with the world. Their goal is to stimulate the world itself both to welcome God and to reach beyond itself toward God.

The vocation of members of secular institutes is, in this sense, a vocation “at the border,” because it is located on the frontier that runs between the world and God and on the threshold introducing the One to the other. Lay people who consecrate their secularity announce to humanity that God has crossed that threshold, and they invite humanity to cross it in turn.

**Thoughts from the homilies of Bishop Adriano Tessarollo
at the Eucharistic celebrations during the 2013
International Meeting**

July 29, St. Martha

(Lk 10:36-42)

We usually think about the two sisters in Bethany who welcomed Jesus as prototypes of the lay woman and the woman consecrated in



religious life: Martha as the lay woman, completely absorbed in household activities, and Mary as the woman dedicated to the contemplative life.

Instead, in this episode from the Gospel of Luke we are invited to see a depiction of the Church (and of each disciple) as the place where Jesus is welcomed and served in Martha's activity and is heard and prayed to in Mary's attitude of sitting at his feet to listen to his word. Actually, Jesus does not intervene when Martha asks him to, even requesting that Mary give up the listening for the service. Here is the Master's word that restores the correct balance: *"Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her."*

By not having said anything at first, and now with these words, Jesus reaffirms that each disciple and the Church itself develop a relationship with him both through many deeds of service and through staying at his feet listening to him. But when the services insist on eliminating the staying at his feet listening to his word, then those very services degenerate into “anxiety and worry.” We can say that “contemplation and action” are two constitutive dimensions of the identity of the disciple, but the first (contemplation) is the foundation of the second (action) and gives it quality. The relationship with Jesus arises in and is nourished by prayer and listening to his word. This relationship gives a new, Gospel quality to serving and welcoming Christ, which is actualized in the service of one’s brothers and sisters through daily commitment in the Church and in the world. No one can be a disciple of the Lord and live without authentic charity, but authentic charity has its foundation in an encounter with the Lord and in obedience to the one who did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life.

July 30

(Mt 13:36-43; Ex 33:7-11; 34:5-9, 28)

With the parable of the darnel Jesus wishes to say that doing good and doing evil are not equivalent. Evil, even though it is present in human history, will be judged and condemned. Judgment is delayed so there may be repentance and conversion.

The passage from the Book of Exodus shows us the consequences of sin: Moses must build a tent, the sign of God’s presence, outside the camp of the people of God, to signify that God cannot dwell in the midst of a sinful people. In fact, Israel had failed to live up to its promise made on Mt. Sinai: *“Whatever the Lord has told us we will do and carry out.”*

But Moses called upon God to pardon his people, and here God revealed himself as “*Merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in mercy. God’s mercy is from age to age...*” Will God return to live in the midst of his people? The Gospel of John gives us the answer: “*The Word was made flesh and came to live among us*” (Jn 1:14). Jesus Christ, Son of God, God-with-us, is the guarantee that God’s pardon prevails over punishment. In the words of the Psalm we just proclaimed, “*As the heavens tower over the earth, so his mercy towers over those who fear him.*”

We welcome the invitation to turn to him who, as he nourished the people in the desert with manna, now also nourishes us with the unique bread of the Word and of the Eucharist while we are on the path toward the promised land.

July 31 – Loreto

(Mt 13:44-46; Ex 34:29-35)

We are celebrating this Eucharist here at Loreto, at the feet of the Virgin Mary, at the conclusion of our meeting. We ask Mary, the door through whom Christ entered into humanity, to be for us a “door of faith” through whom we may go to Christ. She leads us by the hand and helps us to continue along our pathway to meet Christ.

Jesus’

two parables
that we have
just heard
present us the
dynamic of
Christian living,
which consists
in a search for
what is
precious, for
what is



meaningful and lasting: God and his Reign, for which we are willing to let go of everything else.

Whoever has the good fortune to discover the “hidden treasure” or the “pearl without price” of God’s Reign, that is, Jesus Christ himself, begins a new life, marked by joy. On that “treasure” and on that “pearl” one gambles her whole life. It is the joy of possessing what really counts. Meeting Christ, in faith, becomes the wellspring of joy. If life means seeking God, Paradise means being with God. Today the Lord becomes present in the sacraments.



In Exodus we read that Moses radiated light after his encounter with God. In the liturgy we share Moses’ experience: we experience our own encounter with God and depart renewed

and transformed. By the Eucharist and in the Eucharist we are called and transformed in Christ, departing radiant with the energy and the love of Christ to live and manifest to the world this same energy and love that we have absorbed from our communion with him.

August 1

(Mt 13:47-53)

Jesus speaks to us again about the Reign of God: *“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net thrown into the sea, which collects fish of every kind.... Thus it will be at the end of the age. The angels will go out and separate the wicked from*

the righteous.” The Reign of God also envisions the moment of separation, of judgment, when our final salvation is the issue, depending on our being “good fish or bad fish” right now. Jesus’ urgent invitation is to walk toward the Lord and toward the new things, the salvation, that he is preparing for us, but that we must also accept.

The present is the time and the opportunity for conversion. I recall a parable of the prophet Jeremiah, who imagines God as a potter at the wheel, molding his clay pots. If the pot does not turn out well, the potter does not discard that clay but uses it to shape a new pot. Failure can happen to us too at times! The Lord does not throw us away, but mixes us up again, makes us new, gives us a new opportunity so that at the time of judgment we do not have to find ourselves among the “bad fish.” Our salvation is closer to his heart than anything else. Let us allow ourselves to be molded by him who has a plan of salvation for each one of us.



To Be Witnesses of Love

*My Lord, my only life and hope,
in flame my heart with your love,
grant that I may desire heavenly things.
Make me strong and happy in being and in doing.*

*My Lord, my only life and hope,
Grant that all may rejoice in holiness,
may be renewed in your love
and, in the earthly city,
may desire our heavenly homeland.*

*My Lord, my only life and hope,
grant that I may be ready to do good to all.
May my presence in the world and among others
console, ennoble, and make them happy.*

*Saint Angela,
preserve me in upright living,
always desiring what is good.*

*Your exhortations are loving advice for me.
This is how I want to live my earthly pilgrimage,
awaiting the ultimate encounter
with the Lover of us all.*

Amen.

(c.d.)

