

**“VALUES OF SECULAR LIFE”**  
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I thank Maria for the invitation to be here among you to share a brief stretch of this road that is the assembly of the Federation. Each assembly is an event to celebrate. The term “celebrate,” wrote Enzo Bianchi, refers to the mystery of God; when Christians celebrate they celebrate the mystery of God. From this perspective the celebration is always a synergy between the action of God and the action of the Church. I like to think about these days of yours as this synergy between God and the small portion of the Church that is the Federation, represented here through your words, your intuitions, and even your different reflections.

I would like my words to share with you a passion. This will not be an academic lecture or a discourse from an expert or a wise person; it will be a sharing of some reflections that arise from my own life and that, I hope may be able to speak to your lives.

I will deal with a passion for the world, a passion that makes you live in an ever new and daily discovery of God’s presence in the world and in history and makes you live in this world and this history with an attitude that is much more than simple acceptance, but is a true and actual immersion.

As you already understand, I would like to center this speech of mine more in the heart than in the head. Let me explain: the term “passion” makes me think of the experience of falling in love, which makes you see the other in a particular light, not quite as he is. Seeing him almost doesn’t matter; what matters is only to follow this emotion that you feel drawing you, all of you. But when I say “an ever new and daily discovery,” I think instead of the love which steps in (or can step in), after the time of falling in love, when you begin to see the other without the haze of passion, when you can step back and see him in his good qualities but also in his limitations. On the strength of love you accept him and realize that you are discovering the relationship to be ever more profound and solid.

This is our stance in the world; this is the sense of our vocation as consecrated seculars. These words suggest something to me concretely.

Our vocation begins with a call. *You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you* (John 15:16). A call to which we responded willingly because that road was right for us, because this was something indescribable that allowed us to discover a profound harmony with the proposition of remaining in the world, of changing our life not at all, but of giving our life fully.

Thanks to my work I have been able to observe that among the founders, among the first women or men who followed the founders’ inspiration, this question often recurs: how to give one’s whole life, how to respond—yes totally—to the total love of the Lord, without abandoning one’s surroundings for work, for apostolate, for relationships with family and friends?

This is the characteristic of consecrated secularity: totally immersed in the world and totally oriented to God, totally with humanity and totally with God.

My thoughts turn to when a man and a woman decide to live together, and then begin living with each other. “Living together,” that is, living with; no longer living in separate places, with their different habits and styles, and spending a few hours a day or even sharing long stretches of time

together. Living together means truly together, sharing the same surroundings and things, but also sharing emotions, joys, anxieties, and worries. Living together, then, brings a full range of knowledge, no longer the knowledge of a fiancée, because now you see the other in all the moments of life, experience his habits, and discover his attitudes and his reactions in life's different situations, from the ordinary to the unusual. Living together and this new knowledge require you to live up to a new dimension of acceptance, I would say to a little more acceptance. This is because the other is different from me and often is also different from what I have seen or desired, and nonetheless one is called to share everything with him. Think about how many couples reach a crisis for this reason: they do not know how to accept the difference of the other, become exasperated by not having more of their own space and from being always together.

Therefore, living together sooner or later forces a choice: to accept or unfortunately to reject the other.

You see, our secularity speaks of our living together. We live, we share everything, always, with the men and women of our time. We do not have times when we can go home (to return to the example of the fiancée).

We also know the world because we spend time with it, because we love it, because we are in this world and in this time, and we are here with ourselves; not because we study it, read manuals, or hear reports. Ours is a knowledge that starts in our very life: I know the value of friendship because I have experienced it; I know the value of peace because I have experienced and shaped times of peace; I know the value of confusion because some situations in my life or the lives of people around me tell me how much confusion is possible; I know poverty because I see my own poverty or that of the people around me; I know so many forms of poverty because I find them within me, in my family members, in my colleagues at work, and in parochial, ecclesial, and political environments. We know "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the [women and] men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted" (*Gaudium et Spes*) because we are women of today and we live among the women and men of this time.

We could pose all this as a question: Do we know this world of ours, this time of ours? Are we secular? Often it feels necessary to be *experts in humanity*: in my simplicity I think that this phrase should not mean that we are capable of solving humanity's problems or capable of exact sociological or psychological descriptions. Instead, I believe that it says how much we are what we are called (secular): nothing human is foreign to me, all interests me and belongs to me, just as everything in my own person interests me and belongs to me!

Here is another question: Do we live apart from this world and this time? And here I turn to the example of living together: I don't know whether any of you have experienced when a couple live apart in the same house: the same environment, perhaps even the same schedule, but nothing more: total indifference to one another, instead ignoring each other because it hurts us to consider the other, who is maybe not the way we would like.

This then is the question: Is there something in this world that I do not consider my own because I feel that it is so far from me or completely contrary to me, with which I don't want to share anything, that I don't listen to, don't try to know its motivations, perhaps mistakenly I do not even approach it but simply cut it out of my life?

Am I aware that I could be ignoring something or someone?

When I ignore something or, worse, someone, I think that I am, in some way, failing the principal call of my life that would have me totally immersed in and part of this time and this world just as the Lord Jesus Christ was.

I believe that these are important questions because they speak of fidelity to our vocation and of the wealth of our vocation that we may be putting at risk.

In 1976, Paul VI spoke to secular institutes some words that I think should be known to each member of a secular institute: *Your existential and sociological secular condition becomes a theological reality; it is your way to accomplish and bear witness to salvation.* Before repeating that the secular condition is our “way to,” I believe that by mentioning “theological reality” the Pope wishes to recall that our existential and sociological condition is the place where God speaks to us, in which God is manifested. To what extent are these words ours?

Maybe it is easy to find God’s footsteps in our lives, in what happens to us, to discover with what great care God accompanies our efforts, to experience with what great love God “covers” our infidelities, to see in sum how our personal history is the history of salvation because God is betting on us as we are, with our limitations and our treacheries. I said “maybe.” Because even these are not simple occurrences, but they are part of our formation anyway.

I ask myself: Is it equally easy to find the footsteps of God in this time and this place where we live? To believe that the reign of God is manifested in this world? To sing with the songwriter M. Frisina *“The Kingdom of God is here in the midst of us. The Kingdom of God comes in humility; blessed is the one who welcomes it in simplicity.”*

*“The Kingdom of God is a gift that transcends us,”* wrote John Paul II. *“The kingdom of God is not a concept, a doctrine, or a program subject to free interpretation, but it is before all else a person with the face and name of Jesus of Nazareth, the image of the invisible God”* (ENCYCLICAL LETTER REDEMPTORIS MISSIO, n. 18).

Benedict XVI seems to continue this discourse: *“In a period in which for many God has become the great Unknown and Jesus merely an important figure of the past, missionary action will not be relaunched without the renewal of the quality of our faith and our prayer: we will not be able to offer appropriate answers without a new reception of the gift of Grace; we will not know how to win people over to the Gospel except by being the first to return to a profound experience of God”* (DISCOURSE OF THE HOLY FATHER BENEDICT XVI TO THE ASSEMBLY OF THE ITALIAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE, MAY 24, 2012).

I return to the discourse of experience. As I can know the world because I experience the world, so I can know God because I have a daily relationship with God. The Pope’s words are very effective here: *“adults in the faith have encountered Jesus Christ who has become the fundamental reference of their life; people who know him because they love him and love him because they have become acquainted with him”* (DISCOURSE OF THE HOLY FATHER BENEDICT XVI TO THE ASSEMBLY OF THE ITALIAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE, MAY 24, 2012).

A knowledge that arises from love, a love that permits knowledge.

Our living together assumes in this way a completely special significance. Like two people who, in celebrating the sacrament of matrimony, take on a deep significance for their living together, so also our abiding in the world has, in God, a special value.

This special significance recalls a second fundamental stance of secularity as our habitat: the knowledge that blends with wisdom.

To knowledge, that gift of the Spirit that permits me to read the Lord's presence in reality, I add wisdom, that gift of the Spirit that permits me to read all reality in God. It permits me to see and to love creation, humanity and human history in the light of the Lord.

That attentive way of looking at the world, available to it, free of all preconceptions in order to avoid the risk of reading history roughly or rigidly, becomes illuminated by faith. All human happenings are submitted to the Spirit's discernment, to find in all of it a mysterious rendezvous with God.

Often Jesus invited the disciples and the crowds to look and to see in a different way and to allow things and deeds that are normally read in another way to speak of the divine. "*Look at the birds of the sky...observe how the lilies of the field grow; Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of them*" (Mt. 6:26-28). I also think about the Gospel passage where, when he was dining in the house of Simon the Pharisee, people were scandalized at the behavior of the sinful woman toward Jesus. I think of Jesus' reply, inviting his host to look at that woman in a different, unusual way, not stopping with external behavior. Rather he asked Simon to look at that creature at his feet as Jesus did, not putting this woman in a narrow category based on her sins, but glimpsing repentance, conversion, and deep gratitude to the one who had pardoned her.

It would serve no purpose at all to know every reality, to feel part of a whole, without casting upon it all the gaze of faith. This is our vocation and, I might say, our principal mission.

To a Christian's eyes, reality is always a parable to interpret, even though interpreting it is extremely difficult for us. That is because this reading of reality requires grace, but also effort. Reality, even tragic reality, speaks, tells a story, raises questions, and challenges the Christian's way of seeing, so that the Christian cannot remain indifferent to the world's suffering. We search for what the Lord intends to say to us through events that remain indecipherable to the human gaze. It is not easy to exert oneself in reading reality as a manifestation, so that things, all things, speak to us of the Divine Mystery that inhabits them. I ask myself how much our formation programs may help us in this reading, as the tools that can assist this synergy between knowledge and wisdom.

At the personal level it seems to me that a typical tool of secular consecration could help us, conversation with a leader—where we seek to read our life and our fidelity to our call, where we come up with the truth of our life in the light of the Word and of the Constitutions.

But do we have the tools to come up with the truth about the world and about history? Do we successfully help ourselves (communally too) in this process that does not focus on an isolated detail, but always inserts it in a context—not only the context of time, but also the context of Salvation History?

Does our prayer reflect and express this effort, or give thanks for the gift of an understanding informed by wisdom? And even before that, I would say, does our prayer enter the whole world and all of history?

As you see this discourse is open and in motion just like the world and this time! Maybe we could pay attention to some virtuous attitudes that characterize our secular consecration.

The principal attitude, I believe, may be the capacity to stay in the question. That seems to me like a

lay person's expression for our capacity to accept mystery. It is the virtue of those who know how to live even when they don't have exhaustive explanations, the virtue of those who know how to bear the weight of uncertainty.

I consider that it may be the principal virtue because as, the Pope has written, *"The process of communication nowadays is largely fuelled by questions in search of answers. Search engines and social networks have become the starting point of communication for many people who are seeking advice, ideas, information and answers. In our time, the internet is becoming ever more a forum for questions and answers – indeed, people today are frequently bombarded with answers to questions they have never asked and to needs of which they were unaware"* (MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER BENEDICT XVI FOR THE 46TH WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY, MAY 20, 2012).

Furthermore, we are compelled to respond quickly, to line up on one side, which often and unfortunately amounts to setting ourselves against some other side.

Staying in the question even when there are no immediate answers. Accepting the mystery. Knowing how to wait for it to be unveiled. As I said before, mystery exists in our entire history. Here is a commonplace example to clarify this thought: Staying in the question also means to await the "solution" of some reported event without quickly giving our own commentary on it, without being convinced of the guilt of one person and not of the other. In this case to stay in the question means to have a critical attitude to information that comes through the mass media, which have enormous power today maybe exactly because the listeners—we listeners—are incapable of discernment.

Exercising patience. Not finding quick answers to the world's suffering, we can be overwhelmed by the suffering or by rage. This is understandable. We are asked to exercise the virtue of patience. We get impatient every time we are blocked from using our power. Before the mystery of suffering our reason has no power, and we become impatient. In Saint Paul's list of fifteen qualities of charity (I Corinthians 13), patience is the first and the last, as it encompasses all the others.

Remaining faithful and creative in the search. A Christian's patience is not resignation or immobility, but a careful and intelligent search in the midst of the events that befall humanity and have no immediate explanation. In the face of these happenings, the Christian asks the Lord and consults human responsibility.

Sustaining ourselves in mutual charity while we wait. Waiting is fundamental even when our expectations have been disappointed, and this exercise of waiting for Goodness requires mutual support and leaning on one another (to develop this, I mentioned before our formation programs).

I conclude with a quotation from the words of Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, contained in a book of interviews co-written with a lay man. The Cardinal says, *"I am here in my fragility, a poor man, simple and vulnerable. Yes, I am divided within myself, fractured, many-sided, and my ability to make sense of things is shattered every day before the complexity of reality, as waves are shattered against a cliff. I would not want what is written in this book to downplay the efforts that those who 'have a leading role' share—without letup or minimizing—with every man and woman, old person and baby, sick and desperate person on earth"* (*Cambiare il cuore*, Card. Martini with Alain Elkann, pp.126-27).

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