

A New Way of Living the Consecrated Life: Secular Institutes, an Introduction

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These are some of the things I hear people saying about me:

"She is a lay religious."

"She is a Sister without habit".

"She is a Sister living in the world".

"She is like a Sister but she is not one...!"

These are the ways my friends speak of me. Very often, laughingly, I tell them: "I prefer that you call me by my name". Everything that they say about me and my life are seemingly contradictory. In fact, they do express in a certain way the reality of my enigmatic life as a consecrated person living in the world. In canonical terms, my organization is called a secular institute. Blessed Pope John Paul II, in his Apostolic Exhortation about the consecrated life, recognized secular institutes as one of the new expressions of consecrated life: "The Holy Spirit, who wondrously fashions the variety of charisms, has given rise in our time to new expressions of consecrated life, which appear as a providential response to the new needs encountered by the Church today as she carries out her mission in the world. One thinks in the first place of the members of secular institutes seeking to live out their consecration to God in the world through the profession of the evangelical counsels in the midst of temporal realities [...]".

Pope Paul VI on many occasions described the newness of secular institutes as "a new form of consecrated life" and "a new and original form of consecration." The two Pontiffs tell us two things: on one hand, that the essence of the life of secular institutes is a consecrated life; on another hand, that they affirm that its

modality and its form are completely new and original. Pope Paul VI said that the recognition of secular institutes is a sign of a Church of new-found treasures [...], new paths of holiness, new holy enterprises, unforeseen, unpredictable; a sign of the Church's vitality whose divine, inexhaustible source is Christ and his Holy Spirit. What is new in this kind of consecrated life, compared to what is familiarly known as the religious life? In the first part of this article, we will look at the newness common to all secular institutes, and in the second part we will look at the newness proper to my own Carmelite Institute of secular life, and show concretely how we live out this consecration.

The Newness of the Consecrated Life in Secular Institutes

From the Church's earliest times, the Holy Spirit inspired and guided many holy men and women to found religious orders and congregations in response to the needs of the world. In the Church's history, these religious orders and congregations bore innumerable fruits of holiness for the glory of God.

The foundation of secular institutes is a new religious phenomenon. Facing the new challenges of the modern world, the same living Spirit called his new servants to found some new forms of consecrated life. Different groups with different charisms started to emerge only during the early years of the nineteenth century. Pope Pius XII officially recognized them as secular institutes in his Apostolic Constitution "Provida Mater Ecclesia," issued on February 2, 1947. This is a very important document in the history of the Church. Later, Pope Paul VI called this Constitution "the birth certificate" of secular institutes.

By the profession of the evangelical counsels – poverty, chastity and obedience - we are totally consecrated to God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength; and with all our mind. We follow Christ more closely under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We work for the building up of the Church and the salvation of the world, striving for the perfection of charity in service to the Kingdom of God. This sincere desire, and the real dynamism of the complete gift of our selves to God for the

kingdom of God is common to all the consecrated persons. Be they members of religious orders or members of secular institutes.

What is fundamentally new in the secular institutes as compared to the regular religious orders is the way of living out the life of consecration. Our consecration in the secular institutes is a full consecration to God and a full consecration to the world. This consecration in the world is rooted in the knowledge and the example of the Incarnation of the Word of God: "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us". (Jn 1:14). And, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." (Jn 3:16). In other words, our complete consecration to God leads us to turn our hearts to the world that He loves so much. For us, the world is the place for the realization of our absolute consecration to God. This double movement in our life of consecration is the evident manifestation of the two movements of the same one love: for God and for our neighbor.

A religious person is generally called to live separately from the life of the world, and this is signified by the wearing of a religious habit. On the other hand, the precise purpose of our consecration in a secular institute is to follow the evangelical counsels in the world, free to take on those imperative tasks of charity, from which the religious communities are practically debarred. Pope Paul VI explained the meaning of this consecration:

"Consecration indicates the personal, unseen structure supporting your inmost self and all you do. Here is the deep, hidden human potential for which the people you live with have no explanation, and often have no idea about it. Your baptismal consecration has been more deeply and strongly rooted by a greater claim of love. It is the stirring of the Holy Spirit. It is not identical with that of religious. Nevertheless it impels you to a fundamental life option of the Beatitudes of the Gospel, so that you are really consecrated and really in the world. "You are in the world and not of the world but for the world," as I said on another occasion. You live a true, genuine consecration according to the evangelical counsels but without the fullness of visibility proper to religious consecration, which consists in a more strictly common way of life and the "sign" of the religious habit. Yours is a new and original form of consecration. It was the Holy Spirit that put this idea into

the minds of the faithful, so that they could live in this way, still surrounded by the world's realities and that the power of evangelical counsels - the divine values of eternity — should find their way into the heart of human, spacetime values.”

“What does consecration in the world really mean? As members of secular institutes, we express and exercise our own consecration in our apostolic activity like leaven, and we try to imbue all things with the spirit of the Gospel for the strengthening and growth of the Body of Christ. Talking about secular institutes, Pope John Paul II said: “They (the secular institutes) wish in this way to be a leaven of wisdom and a witness of grace within cultural, economic and political life. 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.”

Living in the world, the members of the secular institutes, like the Church, serve as a leaven and as a kind of soul for human society (*Gaudium et Spes*, 40). The charism of secular institutes shows clearly a very important theme of the Council, the Church's presence in the world: the Church is part and parcel of the world, destined to serve the world, to be the leaven in the dough 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.

One of the very important characteristics of secular institutes is that of “consecrated secularity”. This character makes us aware of a responsibility, of being in the world, to serve the world, to make it as God would have it: more just, more human, to sanctify it from within; to respect the world's rightful autonomy, its values, its laws (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 36). We should take the natural order seriously, working to bring it to perfection and to holiness.

The Newness Lived out in a Carmelite Secular Institute

How is this newness of consecration lived concretely in secular institutes? As you may know, there are many secular institutes with their different chrisms. I cannot pretend to give a complete presentation about all the secular institutes. I can only try to present a little description about my own Institute, to remove some of the shadows hovering over it and to shed some ray of light about this new, original and even mysterious form of the consecrated life based on my experience as a member of this secular institute.

I belong to a Carmelite Secular Institute with three autonomous branches: consecrated women, consecrated men and priests. Our vocation is marked by the particular seal of a prophetic vocation because, from ancient times, Carmel and the Carmelite tradition trace themselves back to a biblical figure - the great prophet Elijah, the spiritual Father and Founder of Carmel. The Carmelites see in him the ideal of their life, which has two dimensions: a strong awareness of the presence of the Lord, and zeal for the Lord. These double dimensions come directly from these two statements of the prophet: "I stand in the living presence of the Lord" (1 Kgs 17:1), and "I have been very jealous for the LORD God of hosts". (1 Kgs 19:10) These two words form the two pillars of our life. In modern language, we call them contemplation and action. These two words correspond perfectly to our total consecration to God and to the world.

Our Prayer Life

Our baptism makes us participate in the divine life of the children of God, and makes us enter into a personal and filial relationship with God. Prayer is the way to foster this intimate relationship with the loving Lord. Silent prayer or "oraison," as it is called in French, is an intimate exchange with the God who loves us. This is very important for us. Our Founder considered silent prayer as the sun and the centre of all our occupations of the day. Thus, we consecrate two hours a day to nourish ourselves through prayer and to let ourselves be filled with God's love in order to bring God's love to others.

I am actually a Chinese teacher in a private Catholic institution, the Jesuit-run Xavier School. My day starts with one hour of silent prayer. It is the sacred hour of my day. Indeed, during this prayer, I talk to God heart to heart, listen to Him, stay in His presence, ask His help for the day and offer my day to Him. After prayer, I feel nourished, enlightened and strengthened by the loving presence of God. Because of this, I can go to work with peace and joy. After work, I take another hour of silent prayer. In this way, I end my day in the presence of God, giving thanks for the good things which happened during the day, interceding for those who count on my prayers, especially for those who suffer physically, morally or spiritually. I try to offer my work and the encounters of the day as fragrant incense to God our Father. Little by little, I try to let myself be transformed into a real contemplative apostle, a docile collaborator of the living God.

Once, during my silent morning prayer, I had a strange but beautiful experience which I would like to share with you. As a member of a secular institute, we are not obliged to live in community. So I live in a staff house provided by the school. Right now, we four Chinese teachers live in the same house. Two come from mainland China, and one comes from the Philippines. This Filipino-Chinese teacher is a Buddhist, who is very faithful to her daily morning prayer. I admire her a lot for this. Every day she gets up almost at the same time as I do, around 4:30 am in order to pray, and to distance herself from her sufferings. So while I was praying in silence, she recites her Buddhist prayers, which consist in saying over and over again the same sentence for one hour: "Lord of the universe" (梵语) in the Indian language. In the beginning, I did not understand her prayer, but after I asked her the meaning, she gave me a prayer card with the English translation. For the first days I was a little bit annoyed by her loud voice. But later, after I understood the meaning, I found it very interesting, because in spite of the difference of our religious faiths, we were praying to the same Lord, the same Creator and the same heavenly Father. However, the big difference between us is that she does not yet know Jesus, the universal Saviour who can deliver her from her suffering. So for me, hearing her prayer, I offer her up in my prayer to Jesus. May Jesus give her true happiness in the true and only

God the Father. In a certain manner I can say that we pray in spiritual unison. I would like to call this experience inter-religious prayer.

The Liturgy of the Hours and the Eucharist: the heart of my daily life

Aside from personal silent prayer, we also pray with the whole Church the liturgy of the hours: Morning Prayer (Lauds), Night Prayer (Compline) during our work day. If we are in community, we chant midday and evening prayer or Vespers also. Of course, the prayer par excellence of the Church, the Eucharist is the heart of our daily life. As the Second Vatican Council emphasized, the Eucharist is the Summit and the Source of the Christian life. Because of my work schedule, I cannot go to the Mass in the morning. But I go to Mass in the evening, after work, around 6 or 7 pm, depending on parish schedules. I try to do this faithfully, rain or shine. This creates a strong curiosity among my colleagues, especially with the two non-Christians, who do not know anything about Christianity. They always ask me why I go to Mass everyday, saying "What is it you find in going to Mass? I told them that participating in Mass every day is like taking food every day. It is the daily nourishment from which I draw all my strength, peace and joy. In fact, my life style provokes a lot of questions from them about my Consecration. Very often, they ask me: Why do you not want to get married? Why did you come to the Philippines to live a simple life when you had an easy life in France for 12 years? These are interesting questions, which touch directly upon my profession of the three evangelical counsels. I try to make them understand by telling them precisely that I renounced marriage and a one single family life for the love of God, and for a greater love of others, which gives me a larger family. I came to the Philippines out of obedience to discover the riches of the Filipino people and their culture. They also ask a lot of questions about God, about different religions and about the meaning of life.

I am happy to receive these kinds of questions because they are occasions for me evangelize, not only with silent witness, but also to discuss with my colleagues fundamental questions about life

and about God. I respect their religious freedom, but I also try as much as possible to make my Catholic faith more beautiful, more attractive and full of variety. God is good, and his goodness is diffusive by nature, as St Thomas Aquinas said. By his kindness, God is always drawing us to him through Jesus.

One day my colleagues asked me to bring them to church so that they could observe what went on at Mass. I think the Holy Spirit Himself placed this desire in them. I was so happy about this, because living as housemate, my life as a consecrated person could become a seed for those who are searching for truth in their conscience. This is precisely the advantage or the power of a secular Institute: to be able to enter into and immerse oneself in the world in order to bring the living God to others.

Our professional work is our apostolate

As children of Carmel, we burn with zeal to bear witness to the living God in the world. Yes, we love the world even though the world does not accept us. We should go precisely to those places where God's rights are not recognized and are even denied. Our Founder stated that atheism should not make us flee, rather it should attract us! Normally, each one of us practices a profession. Our professions are varied: we are formators, professors in universities, teachers in schools, campus ministers, staff in spiritual centres, doctors, nurses, guidance counsellors, accountants, architects, ambassadors, scientists, philosophers, and theologians. Our goal is to enter and to penetrate into different areas of human society in order to bring the living God there. This is why we do not put on a visible religious habit. We dress the way the people of our time and place do. Sending us into the world, our Founder said: "How happy I am to disperse you. You belong to God and you belong to the world." "You are for the world what blood is for the body."

Thus, our varied professions serve as our real apostolate. When we cannot explicitly speak about God, our silent witness becomes more eloquent and effective in revealing God's love to others. Our vocation is to lead people to God. Our Founder expressed a burning desire for the spiritual apostolate: "Those who

are in search of God are everywhere. How I wish to bring to them the infinite Mercy of God.”

My own experience of work in a Chinese-Filipino School

Despite my training in Sacred Scriptures and theology, my main work at present is to be a Chinese teacher in a Chinese-Filipino School in the Philippines. So my primary apostolate is to become a good and responsible teacher for my students and a good colleague to my fellow teachers. With my students, I not only give them language lessons, but I also try to lead them to walk in the direction of human and Gospel values. For example I teach them Chinese values like ren (仁), yi (義), li (禮), zhi (智) and xin (信). I have given to five groups in one of the classes the names of these five traditional Chinese virtues, which are intimately connected to the Gospel values of love, benevolence, justice, wisdom and faith. I also try to educate them to have a sense of truth, to make them think and to discern the true good, and to help them grow in true freedom of conscience. For moral and spiritual growth, our school provides a very good guide. We have a vision, a mission and goals. The school's mission-vision is to help the students to become men and women fully alive, living out the 6 C's: conscience, character, community, competence, culture, compassion. Our goal is to make them become men and women for others. Together with the Jesuit Fathers, my colleagues and I try to live out the mission of the Jesuits as rooted in the Gospels, and inspired by St Ignatius, St Francis Xavier and Paul Xu Guangqi (徐光啓).

Since I live together with other Chinese teachers, we try to have a good “community life.” Of course, each one of us is independent. But sometimes we eat together, and share together our joys, our anxieties, even our sufferings in work and in our own family. For example, the brother of one of our Chinese teacher had a car accident. So we other teachers surrounded and supported her with compassion. We try to make our house a home for each one of us. I try to pay particular attention to the two non-Catholic teachers, because this is the first time that they live in close contact with someone who is a Christian and a consecrated person. This is

another advantage of being a consecrated person living in secular world. Outside of the school setting, I take part in other apostolic activities such as giving Bible classes to the young members of our institute on Saturdays, helping in youth activities, days of recollection and other missionary works.

Towards a daily life in which contemplation and action are well united

Our ideal is to live a life in which contemplation and action are well united. In my daily life, I try to work and walk as much as possible in the presence of God. For example, when I take the metro, ride in buses, or in jeeps, I try to see God in the persons I meet. He is there, with a presence that is so discreet, that He often remains very hidden, yet He is very real. I know I bear God in my heart and I want to bring him to others through a smile, an encouraging word or a helping hand. I try to draw strength and inspiration for my apostolate from prayer, hoping to get more zeal to bring God to others. To be a contemplative apostle is the goal of our Institute. I hope that the powerful and loving presence of God in me will penetrate my whole being more and more, so that God may reign in me, and fashion the fragile vase that I am into a docile instrument of his immense grace. I hope to be able one day to say with St Paul: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

Conclusion

The above is a description of my simple life as a member of one of the secular institutes. We live as consecrated persons in the world to witness to the loving presence of God and to contribute the sanctification of the world from within. Canonically, we are not religious but we carry with us in the world our complete profession of the evangelical counsels. We exercise our consecration in the world by our insertion into it through our different professions. Although we have our houses for the apostolate and for solitude, we are not required, as the religious are, to live in community. However, we return for recharging and renewal periodically to our centers to experience there more intense prayer and fraternal life.

Through the years, secular institutes have proven by their life the authenticity and vitality of this new way of living the consecrated life. After many years of experience, the Second Vatican Council gave thanks to the Holy Spirit for the development of secular institutes: "Thanks to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, secular institutes are increasing every day in the Church. [...] their programs can be fruitful in the missions in many ways as a sign of complete dedication to the evangelization of the world." May secular institutes continue to bear fruit in the world for the glory of God the Father, who lives and reigns with His Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.