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A Brief history of Secular Institutes

For some decades a new form of consecration to God has existed - and been approved in the Church – the Secular Institutes. They are distinguished from all forms of consecrated life, because for their members to remain in the "secular reality", that is, in the midst of the world, without the obligation of common life, laity among the laity, is an essential and determining element of their vocation, like (on a par with) consecration to God.

A form of consecration to God lived in the world, in one's own family, was there also in the earliest centuries of the Christian era: it was consecrated virginity or celibacy for the Kingdom, in conformity with an integral observance of the Gospel. Among isolated Christians and scattered in a society that was still largely pagan, these vocations to a consecration to God lived in the midst of the world flourished as a seed of renewal and as leaven hidden in the mass.

Angela di Merici begins the experience of the Ursulines in 1535: a company of virgins who want to consecrate themselves to the Lord, without withdrawing from the place where they live. Wherever they are, they will live a life of prayer and will remain attentive to the needs of others.

In the nineteenth century there were the first attempts at real associations of lay people consecrated to God; and also the first interventions of the Church, precisely with the Decree *Ecclesia Cattolica*, issued by the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, and confirmed on 11 August 1889 by Leo XIII. In it, norms were given for the approval of institutes whose members remained in the world and did not wear a habit that distinguished them from the other lay people. It was established that they should be approved as pious associations under the jurisdiction of their own Bishop. It was a small step forward, if we consider that for more than a thousand years consecration to God recognized by the Church, was not conceived, if not combined with separation from the family, (and the) professional and social sphere. Between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, In Italy and France and also in Spain the rise of a strong militant laity movement in the ranks of Catholic Action, had great influence in the preparation of a strong calibre of women and men who would engage in the religious and social apostolate that the times demanded.

Precisely this new commitment of the laity, together with a more authentic Christian formation, aroused in some lay people the desire for complete donation. Thus, the ideal began to take shape: to consecrate oneself to God while remaining in the world to work within it for the advent of the Kingdom of Christ. What is now called the "**charism of Secular Institutes**" - consecration to God, secularity, apostolate - was already clearly outlined. The difficulties inherent in these first attempts were many and serious: the proposal of reconciling the consecration to God with the condition of lay people living in the world appeared especially bold and almost revolutionary.

The two terms secularity – (and) consecration seemed to exclude each other. Meanwhile, new movements were born all over the world, and the first contacts, the first exchanges of experiences confirmed that the way was good and responded to the needs of the times.

In May 1938, with the authorization of Pius XI, a convention was held in St. Gallen, Switzerland in which founders and leaders of twenty associations of lay people consecrated to God from different countries took part. They joyfully recognized the fundamental identity of their aspirations, and agreed to ask the Holy See for the recognition of these lay associations.

A Historical - juridical - canonical Memory on the Associations of lay people consecrated to God in the world was drawn up, in 1939 it was sent to the Holy Father Pius XII, to the Congregation of the Council and to the Cardinals. But in November of the same year the order to withdraw it came from the Holy Office. After this intervention, the situation of the lay movements that, in the Church, wanted a consecration for the apostolate, remained extremely uncertain and

confused. It was practically returned to the line of the *Ecclesia Cattolica* decree of 1889, with only a few minor adjustments.

That it was a situation of dialogue was clear when, in March 1947, the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia* was promulgated (with date 2 February 1947, feast of Purification). In it, a history of the "states of perfection", from Religious Orders to Congregations and Societies of common life, is first and foremost traced. As a final step the new institutions of lay people (and priests regular) consecrated to God is inserted, to which the name of "Secular Institutes" is ascribed. It was a decisive step, a conquest that gave a juridical foundation and a place in the Church to the new form of consecrated life in the midst of world. However, there was no lack of perplexity and resistance to this document which did not satisfy the deepest feelings of the consecrated lay persons in the world because it presented the apostolate as a temporary task for that of the religious and priestly, while it said nothing about the specific action of the secular lay person in his own social and professional environment, and about his personal responsibility. On 12 March 1948 Pius XII issued the *Motu Proprio Primo Feliciter*, which not only clarified *Provida Mater*, but on some points offered the key to its right interpretation. If the *Provida Mater* offers the juridical foundation of Secular Institutes, *Primo Feliciter* expresses (describes) the life of their members. A few days later the decree *Cum Sanctissimus* of the Sacred Congregation of Religious was issued, which is a kind of official commentary on the directives concerning Secular Institutes. The initial difficulties and resistance collapsed and a moment of intense creative vitality began in forms responding to the new vocation.

The ideas were not yet clear. In fact, despite the statements of the official documents, it was difficult to reconcile a full secularity with a full consecration, also due to the tendency, proper to ecclesiastics and religious, to identify the **secular condition** with the **marital status** and the **consecration to God** through the evangelical counsels **with religious life**.

It took the Second Vatican Council to explicitly affirm some principles in which the most profound and valid motivations of the vocation of the laity consecrated to God in the world are found, among other things: the recognition of the dignity and autonomy of the "earthly city" (GS 34 and 43); the dignity of the laity and their mission in the world (LG 31-38, 41); the vocation to holiness for all men (LG 39-42); a unitary and grandiose vision of the created universe and of human history summed up in Christ (GS 45). These are the concepts that underpin every consecration in the world: hearing them proclaimed from such an authoritative source was for the secular institutes a confirmation of the validity of their vocation. It is in the conciliar decree *Perfectae caritatis* in article 11 that the theme of secular institutes is dealt with specifically. It contains enough to define its essential characteristics: "they are not religious"; it entails a "true and complete profession of the evangelical counsels in the world"; this profession "confers a consecration"; secularity is the "proper and peculiar character" of these Institutes. Meanwhile, the Secular Institutes, (which were) growing in number, felt the need to meet and exchange ideas.

Thus, after two years of preparation, in 1970, from September 20th to 26th, the first international congress of secular institutes took place in Rome, attended by members of 92 institutes. There common points and common aspirations emerged, but also the different positions of the Institutes themselves. While considering that secularity is first of all an interior attitude towards the world, for some Institutes it translates into a set of conditions of life that do not distinguish the member of the Institute from other laymen, that does not offer life in common, that do not have their own works and consequently maintain confidentiality (reserve) regarding the names of its own members. Other Institutes, on the other hand, have life in common, and their own works with a specific formation. In this case the reserve has no reason to be. Between these two extremes there is a wide range of shades. Such a great variety demonstrates the power of the Spirit that has given rise to such a luxuriant flowering of forms, of secular consecration, similar but different, responding to the multiple needs of our time.

Following the congress of 1970, the World Conference of Secular Institutes (CMIS) was established; and gradually the national conferences began (for Italy, the Italian Conference of Secular Institutes - CIIS) with the aim of promoting common reflection and mutual help. The Pontifical Magisterium and the work of reflection of the Institutes have been decisive instruments to deepen and live such a modern and demanding vocation.