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**of the General Council  
of the Salesian Society  
of St John Bosco**

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OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

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**LETTER TO THE DON BOSCO VOLUNTEERS,  
TO THE SALESIANS AND ALL GROUPS  
OF THE SALESIAN FAMILY ON THE OCCASION  
OF THE 80TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BEGINNING  
OF THE INSTITUTE**

Introduction. - The originality of the Spirit of God. - The ministry of the Rector Major. - The salesian nature of the Institute. - A fact which challenges the Salesians and the Salesian Family. - The consecrated secular state. - The unique elements of consecrated secularity. - Consecration 'qualifies' secularity. - Secularity 'defines' consecration. - The mission of consecrated secular persons. - An original salesian spirituality. - Conclusion.

Rome, 24 May 1997  
*Feast of Mary Help of Christians*

My dear confreres,

My visits to different parts of the Congregation have shown me the interest of Provinces and local communities in the guidelines of the GC24. In some places they are only just approaching the matter, while others are already adopting concrete suggestions for the animation of the educative and pastoral communities, of the Salesian Family and of the Salesian Movement.

I am also convinced of the fruitfulness of these three working environments which allow us to join numerous lay people to us, exploit their vocational and professional qualities which are in line with our spirit, and make them sharers in our responsibility for the salesian mission through suitable formative processes.

In particular, I want to stress the fact that the Salesian Family, about which I have already had the opportunity to write to you, is becoming consolidated through the growth of each individual group and attention to the Family as a whole. The two processes are taking place simultaneously. Each group is called upon to grow by incorporating new members, to strengthen itself internally by a program of formation, and to make itself autonomous in apostolic initiatives and in organization. Together, on the other hand, communication is fostered, a coordination is established with advantages and concrete requirements but without rigid schemes, and in consequence mutual support is offered and greater depth is given to the spirituality we have in common.

It is precisely from this standpoint of helping the individual groups to grow and to keep in mind the whole Family, that I have thought it useful to offer also to you the text of the letter I have written for the Don Bosco Volunteers at their request on the occasion of the eightieth anniversary of their Institute.

It seemed to me that it would be of help if the whole Family had a better knowledge of this Institute, which at present has 1,300 members, in 150 groups and subgroups spread across 44 countries, and which can be further extended in many countries where other groups of our spiritual Family are already at work. And at the same time, a reflection on their identity will help us Salesians and the entire Family to better understand one of the dimensions of our mission: the lay and secular dimension, which during the present six-year period we are intending to take up decisively, especially as regards its practical consequences.

The letter will also have practical results in connection with the spiritual assistance which in accordance with our Regulations (cf. art 40) we must give to the DBV, and which nowadays is all the more necessary because of the world situation and the present era of the Church.

I therefore entrust this letter to your careful attention, not



least as an act of thanksgiving to God and as a testimony of affection for our Volunteer sisters. It concerns our charism, our spirit, our mission and our Family.

\* \* \*

*Dear Sisters in Don Bosco,*

Since my first meeting with your Central Council, you have been inviting me to write a letter in which, prompted by the 80th anniversary of your Institute, I could offer a stimulus to the process of renewal on which you are engaged in the light of Vatican II.

I willingly comply with your wishes. It is in line with the reflection of the SDB GC24 which analyzed more deeply the sense of the sharing and communion in Don Bosco's spirit and mission with the laity, whose vocation is marked by its secular character: and you represent for us a special category of secular persons, almost a point of meeting and fusion between the experience of religious and that of lay people.

The letter provides me with an opportunity to reexamine the significance and value of the salesian charism lived in a consecrated secular form; and to identify, in recalling a fact which might seem only a calendar item, an event of grace which is a reminder to all the members of the Salesian Family and prompts them to a renewed commitment.

I do not want to repeat things which are already well known to you, and which you are striving so zealously to put into practice in your lives. But as I reflect on the different groups of the Salesian Family, I think it may be opportune to refer once again to certain facts which already form part of the Church's heritage and should be part too of our common vision and mentality.

As a secular Institute you represent a characteristic phenomenon in the Church. To dwell for a moment on the aspects

which constitute what is new about you and are at the roots of your originality, will help all of us to be better aware of our salesian vocation and more faithful to it.

## 1. The originality of the Spirit of God.

Your vocation to a consecrated life in the world takes shape in the historical and ecclesial context of the post-modern age recently begun.

The human race is at a crucial turning point in its history, characterized by many signs which are positive and others which are ambiguous. Among these is the tendency to think that it is sufficient unto itself and therefore has no need of God nor of the sacrament of the Church in the development of its life. We are witnessing a dangerous divorce between technical and scientific progress and faith in the living God, who is relegated to private life.

This was asserted by Paul VI on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of *Provida Mater*: "The most serious problem in the present development is that of the relationship between the natural and supernatural orders".<sup>1</sup>

The signs of this tendency are an insistent challenge to us. On the one hand they obscure the religious connection in many sectors of public and social life, and on the other there is a tendency towards vague spiritual experiences which imply a flight from concrete experience.

The Church, for its part, has devoted particular attention to the development of consecrated life, recognizing the various forms in which it has been already expressed and its openness to new manifestations still unthought of. It is an indication of the originality of the Spirit who is present in all ages.

Secular consecration is one of these novelties which shows

<sup>1</sup> Paul VI on 25th anniv. of *Provida Mater*

that the Church has not ceased to reach out and discern.<sup>2</sup> The fundamental stages you know already, because you have been involved personally in following them: from *Provida Mater* (1947) to the first International Congress of Secular Institutes (1970), to the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (1995), and to the celebration of the 50th anniversary of *Provida Mater* (1997). You are also able to give due weight to the rich indications which the Supreme Pontiffs have offered you, from Pius XII to John Paul II.

Your Institute has followed with enthusiasm the process of renewal called for by the Council, and in your General Assemblies you have studied more deeply the various constitutive elements of the charism. After the pontifical recognition of the Institute (7 August 1978), you have lived in depth and rich spirituality the reformulation of the Constitutions.

The beatification of Fr Philip Rinaldi (1990) gave a further impulse to your renewal, accompanied by the Rector Major, Fr Egidio Viganò, who was always paternally close to you with his word and understanding, with reflection and pastoral guidance.

In the meantime you have spread to new areas and have uninterruptedly increased in number, while at the same time consolidating your organization in the area of animation and providing efficacious instruments for formation. Today your Institute is seen as well founded, with many members and fertile in vocations, and capable of autonomy.

The prevailing religious and social circumstances make it the more urgent that you consider who you are and what place you occupy in the Church and the Salesian Family.

We all recognize (in the words of Paul VI) that "there has been an uninterrupted rain of new jewels, an unexpected flourishing of new initiatives of holiness"<sup>3</sup> in the Church and, for our part, in Don Bosco's Family. And we feel that it is good for all of us to be aware of the fact.

<sup>2</sup> cf. VC 10

<sup>3</sup> Paul VI to Superiors of Sec. Insts. 20. Sep. 1972

## 2. The ministry of the Rector Major.

I read in your Constitutions: "The foundation, the project of life, and tradition places the Institute in the circle of the Salesian Family, and it has been officially recognized as part of it.

The Institute considers the Rector Major of the Salesians, successor of Don Bosco, as the Father of the entire Salesian Family; he is called upon to promote among the various groups and members the unity of the spirit and fidelity to the common mission"<sup>4</sup>.

In virtue of the common awareness of a paternity which derives from Don Bosco, and in fidelity to the task entrusted to me of guarding and fostering the salesian spirit in harmony with the different manifestations of the salesian vocation, I begin this reflection on consecrated secularity.

I approach it from many different and complementary standpoints: the Salesian Family in its entirety, the unique nature of the Secular Institute of the DBV, the relationship between the Volunteers and the Congregation, the salesian spirit in its various shades according to each Group, and other similar viewpoints. The present letter is meant to be fraternal and orientative in style, and so I shall incorporate points for reflection and motivations for orientation.

It is a letter addressed to you, dear Sisters, but it is offered for careful reading to all the Groups of the Salesian Family. It will contribute, I hope, to a mutual enrichment through the knowledge and communication of the endowments of each Group, and this in turn will develop the spirit of Don Bosco which you share and enrich with a unique type of expression.

The attaining of the 80th anniversary of the foundation of your Institute becomes in this way an event of grace and of fidelity which involves all the members of our Family.

<sup>4</sup> C DBV 71

### 3. The "Salesian" nature of the Institute.

Much has been said and written in this connection. You have condensed the substance of it in article 5 of the Constitutions: "The Volunteers live their vocation by making their own the salesian charism which identifies them in the Church and in the world.

Pastoral charity, the central nucleus of the spirit of Don Bosco, renders them particularly sensitive and open to the human values which the Saint drew from the heart of Christ.

As Don Bosco, they entrust themselves completely to Mary, because they know that she continues in history 'her mission of Mother of the Church and Help of Christians'"<sup>5</sup>.

It may be superfluous to dwell on this point of the vocation of the DBV, if we keep in mind your origin and development. Nonetheless I think it interesting to draw your attention to it once again, albeit briefly, because it is at the root of your originality among secular Institutes and in the Salesian Family itself it constitutes a specific expression.

You yourselves define the salesian charism as identifying you in the Church and in the world<sup>6</sup>. Make it your distinguishing mark: let others recognize in you your salesian roots. Let your life show forth the linkage you have with salesian reality, so that your thoughts and actions, your options and criteria, your words and witness of life express and diffuse the salesian spirit in the Church and in the world. Fr Egidio Viganò, in the letter he addressed to you in 1979, reminded you that "your salesian character is not something tacked on to your Institute; it is vital and elemental".

This means that the consecration you live either finds expression in certain typical values of evangelical life lived in the salesian spirit, or else it cannot have the importance the Church requires in giving it official approval.

<sup>5</sup> C DBV 5

<sup>6</sup> cf. C DBV 5

Very rapidly, and to some extent synthetically I want to remind you: your holiness is either salesian or it is not holiness at all.

This is the 'identifying' element of which the article of the Constitutions speaks. It takes nothing from the compass and vitality of your secularity: quite the opposite. It sustains and gives life and direction to the path of persons who live in the world with the radicality typical of consecration.

For you the result is to be found in the harmony of the features you bring together around and in force of salesianity.

On this point reserve is out of place. People can know you and you can manifest yourselves openly as disciples and followers of Don Bosco in your pursuit of holiness.

#### **4. A fact which challenges the Salesians and the Salesian Family.**

Reflection on the salesian character which is your distinguishing element raises a question in my mind: is the Institute of the DBV sufficiently known by my confreres and by all the members of the Salesian Family?

This is not just a rhetorical question. Some expressions heard in our communities and groups, which I quote in a simplified form, illustrate the dimensions of the problem and questions which cannot be left unanswered.

To some your identity is unclear. They see it as halfway between religious and laity because there are no visible signs of identification! That probably explains why they find it difficult to speak of your vocation.

Others are surprised by your reserve. It seems to them that it commits you to a difficult task of being present and absent at the same time, and binds you to a kind of evangelization which has little impact and reduces vocational possibilities.

And there are still others who wonder about your real involvement in a secularized society for proposing gospel paths to so many brothers and sisters immersed in consumerism, who

have lost the sense of life. They think of your presence as more natural in the Church than in the secular environment.

If such questions are raised, it could mean that we Salesians too should have a better knowledge of the effective identity of a secular Institute, both within and outside the Salesian Family. I hope therefore that the present letter may lead to reflection in salesian communities.

The salesian vocation needs many different expressions through which it can enter daily life from different standpoints: that of the Volunteers is typical and significant for the harmony between the option for evangelization and involvement in ordinary human contexts. It therefore needs its own elbow-room and its own specific forms of presence and action.

## **5. The consecrated secular state.**

You DBV, therefore, are salesian women and your distinguishing characteristic is your consecrated lay state.

Very opportunely, in your IV General Assembly, you base your reflection on consecrated secularity on the mystery and criterion of the Incarnation. From this standpoint we can look again at the sense of secular consecration and the spirituality which must sustain your life.

In the light of what you yourselves have already offered to your Sisters, I will point out some further steps that need to be taken in the development of the vocation of a DBV.

I recognize from the outset that many problems still remain open in connection with secular consecration. A simple and immediate example concerns the imprecise or preferential use of the expressions 'consecrated secularity' or 'secular consecration'. In these different modes of expression there are shades of meaning which are not without their importance.

It is not my intention to take up all the problems, nor consider them under all their various aspects: that would require

an ample treatise of theology, canon law and spirituality. I want rather to consider matters from the standpoint of the Salesian Family, to help its members understand, and from your own perspective to encourage you to realize your vocation to the full.

It must be recognized that secularity (and in consequence consecrated secularity) is continually changing. New situations are met with every day in the fields of the family, economy, social life, political options, and in general in the whole of human commitment.

But there are certain definite points of reference. There is a text of *Perfectae Caritatis* which defines the significance and orientation of secular Institutes: "While it is true that secular institutes are not religious institutes, at the same time they involve a true and full profession of the evangelical counsels in the world, recognized by the Church. This profession confers a consecration on people living in the world, men and women, laymen and clerics.

Therefore they should make it their chief aim to give themselves to God totally in perfect charity. The institutes themselves ought to preserve their own special character – their secular character, that is to say – to the end that they may be able to carry on effectively and everywhere the apostolate in the world and, as it were, from the world, for which they were founded.

At the same time let them know quite clearly that they will be unable to accomplish so great a task unless the members have so thorough a grounding in matters divine and human that they will be truly leaven in the world, for the strengthening and increase of the Body of Christ. Superiors therefore should devote great care to the formation, and especially the spiritual formation, of their subjects, and also to the promotion of their higher studies".<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> PC 11



I have used this long quotation to reaffirm the fundamental points expressed by the Council, the implications of which have not been fully grasped by everyone. A few comments on them will help to meet the difficulties referred to earlier.

*A particular characteristic.*

The text of *Perfectae caritatis* states clearly that secular Institutes are not religious Institutes. There is a fundamental distinction between the two: consecrated secular life is a different 'type' of life from consecrated religious life

"You", said Paul VI to members of secular Institutes, "enrich today's Church with a particular example in its secular life, which you live as consecrated persons; and with a particular example in its consecrated life, which you live as seculars".<sup>8</sup>

The element of 'example' in the two cases requires careful consideration. The secularity is not a mere aspect, an external sociological condition of life, nor is it just a collection of interior attitudes, but is a content of the consecration and spirituality.

The consecration, for its part, does not represent an added sanctifying factor but is rooted in the sense of secularity and expresses the soul of the secular Institute in so far as it is not merely 'placed' in the world but embodied in it.

*The consecration, on the part of members of secular Institutes, is real and complete.*

It is a morally perfect consecration, in the measure of the gift of grace communicated to each one, as in other kinds of consecration. It is not some kind of second-class consecration of reduced proportions; neither is it part of a 'broader' religious life, of which it might be an acclimatized example. It is not in fact derived from anything. The Spirit does not repeat himself.

<sup>8</sup> Paul VI to Sups. of Sec. Inst. 20 Sep. '72

It is an original consecration, expressed in the setting of a new institution. It is complete because it permits a complete and loving donation to God and to men, which renders it authentic despite certain mundane appearances.

It is a matter of an evangelical life characterized not by external, psychological or spiritual separation from the world, but by the free practice of the evangelical counsels in the heart of worldly reality, in view of a total offering to God and for the salvation of men.

As such, consecrated life in the world perceives the spiritual needs of the world in which it is inserted and assumes the true and deep aspirations of that world; but it also presents a scale of values different from those proposed by the world which is closed in on itself. By its witness and activity therefore it offers a critique of the stalemate situation in which the world frequently lives; silently it becomes an inspiring model for individuals and for society.

*The consecration of members of secular Institutes is 'secular', i.e. lived in the midst of the world.*

Some have cast doubt on the very possibility of a secular consecration, probably because they have a wrong idea of the sense of consecration as a donation of charity.

Charity is adaptable and can penetrate the whole of creation. It can be lived in every state of life and in every social environment. It can reach its full flowering even while remaining in contact with the most material and corporeal realities of this world.

It is true that certain conditions are necessary. The Gospel enunciates them and the experience of the Church explains them. But the cloister is not one of them, nor is the need to copy religious life.

The fullness of charity emerges like a parable narrated by the Holy Spirit at a point in the Church's history and in that of mankind by continually new means.

Certainly this is a point difficult to grasp, even in our own Salesian Family, by those without direct knowledge of secular institutes, or who are not sufficiently open to the action of the Holy Spirit who "breathes where he wills".

*The members of secular Institutes can be men and women, lay people and priests.*

The ruling is not something secondary. The four points linked with generic difference and situation in the Church could be explored at greater length by asking why such specific enumeration is made.

The fundamental reason is that secular consecration constitutes "the original common characteristic"; it assumes all the conditions or traits in a particular synthesis, enriching them and being itself enriched by them.

I will not go more deeply at this moment into the theme of feminine secular consecration, which concerns you directly. That can be considered at some other time.

I would like rather to recall in these circumstances that, in harmony with the Don Bosco Volunteers there have begun the "Volunteers with Don Bosco" (known in English as the "Don Bosco Secular Institute" - translator's note). This is an incipient male secular institute, which at present exists in various countries of the salesian world in increasing numbers and quality of presence. It is a true gift from the Lord!

The experience already gained by the Congregation in respect of the DBV will be made available to bring the DBSI to a successful conclusion.

All these categories have an element in common: consecration lived in the secular condition and secularity assumed even to the degree of consecration.

*The characteristic of secular Institutes is their secular nature*

The image which best depicts their presence and action is that of leaven. Speaking of consecrated secular persons, Pius XII said: "They live in the midst of the world, their apostolate is carried out with the world's means, their activity is directed to the world's sanctification, and they work after the fashion of leaven. Their whole life is an apostolate and must be expressed as apostolate".<sup>9</sup>

The secularity which is proper to the vocation of the individual members shapes also the Institutes themselves. Their form of staying in the world is that of leaven in the dough. It is useless to ask that they become more visible. Profession for them does not imply organized forms of fellowship expressing a new membership. Obedience does not determine a place and type of apostolic work, and poverty does not mean the personal renunciation of goods and income. Chastity, in which is expressed the option of love for God and neighbour, is lived in a form more likely to give rise to questions than to manifest immediately a religious preference.

The quality of being leaven invests the whole existence of each member and shapes the project of the Institute as a whole.

The purpose is twofold. On the one hand there is the sanctification of the world through a Christian presence expressed in the radical form of a conscious and active consecrated life; and on the other there is immersion in the world and working from within it, so to speak, for its reinvigoration and the growth of the Body of Christ.

The laity are a catalyst in the world, and secular Institutes are the same in the Church which lives in the world. Their particular mission is to animate the laity if the Institute is a lay one, and to animate the priesthood if its members are priests.

<sup>9</sup> Pius XII, *Primo feliciter*

*Those responsible for secular Institutes have a primary and almost sole task: the spiritual formation of the members.*

It is not the responsibility of the leaders to direct the apostolate of the Institute, as would be the case with religious superiors. They cannot dispose of individuals by demanding of them pastoral tasks in a community structure; they have to be left where God has placed them, so that they may become centres of irradiation in the world and among the people.

Poverty of material structures serves to keep them within the bounds of apostolic discretion proper to consecrated secular persons.

Those in charge, free as they are from the concerns of apostolic organization, must dedicate themselves to the formation of the members. The latter must be enabled to live in a full and efficacious form the apostolate linked with their professional occupation and with the social and cultural context in which it is expressed. It is in this that the force of heaven resides.

## **6. The unique elements of consecrated secularity.**

There are two inseparable aspects to your vocation: consecration and secularity. And they are not simply juxtaposed or linked in some vague manner, but are mutually compenetrative.

Now it is enlightening to ask ourselves: why do we qualify the secularity of secular Institutes with the term 'consecrated'?

And why do we define the consecration of secular Institutes with the specification of 'secular'?

The combination of one term with the other gives rise to a number of questions and opens up an equal number of lines for reflection.

To 'qualify' in fact means to strengthen, to lead to a truer sense, to extract what there is of good in a reality, to improve it. And then 'define' emphasizes the limits within which we are

operating; it clarifies manner of life, content of spirituality, forms of activity.

The reflection will help the Groups of the Salesian Family to live certain characteristics of the common salesian vocation. You, in fact, stress realities which are of interest to all of us and which each Group is called upon to assume in line with its own identity.

### **6.1 Consecration 'qualifies' secularity**

The Church's magisterium is constant in its numerous reminders to secular Institutes of the commitment to secularity.

"Secularity indicates your insertion in the world", said Paul VI to those responsible for secular Institutes at top level. "It does not signify only a position, a function, which coincides with living in the world while exercising a 'secular' trade or profession. It means before all else the awareness of being in the world as the specific place for the fulfilment of your Christian responsibility".<sup>10</sup>

These words clearly endorse the important declarations of the Council which underlie the experience of secularity lived even to consecration. Let me specify some of them.

#### *The goodness of the world.*

The statement takes us back to a new vision of the secular reality in which we are all inserted.

'World' has many meanings. Some biblical scholars list up to nine different senses in which this term is used in scriptural language. We do not need to list all of them.

What interests us at the moment is the significance of the term as it is used in *Gaudium et spes*: "The world (...) is the whole human family seen in the context of everything which

<sup>10</sup> Paul VI to Sups. Sec. Inst. 20 Sep. '72

envelopes it: it is the world as the theatre of human history, bearing the marks of its travail, its triumphs and failures; the world, which in the Christian vision has been created and is sustained by the love of its maker, which has been freed from the slavery of sin by Christ, who was crucified and rose again in order to break the stranglehold of the evil one, so that it might be fashioned anew according to God's design and brought to its fulfilment".<sup>11</sup>

The term 'world' refers to all those realities which constitute our daily living; the warp and weft of relationships established between persons; geographical relationships based on territorial vicinity; historical and cultural relationships, laboriously constructed and now producing their results for good and evil; and finally social relationships which give rise to our towns and cities.

Rightly do you like to say, you who are consecrated seculars, that we are all born as seculars; and this because we are born as human beings inserted in the world.

The goodness to which we are referring highlights the presence of God in the world. The love and Providence of the Father, the redemption of the Son and the animation of the Holy Spirit have been at work in it from the beginning. This recognition is not something spontaneous or automatic. It is the result of grace, the consequence of a responsible response of a believer.

When the response implies also the assuming in Christ of the 'world' reality so as to collaborate in its fulfilment; when we aim at the realization of the Kingdom, to which we dedicate all our existence, our gifts and talents, our abilities and values, then we are no longer seculars only by birth or nature but we become so by a call and a vocational option to participate in the history of salvation, with our heart left permanently in the world to find and express in it the love of God.

<sup>11</sup> GS 2

What an amount of salesian sensitivity do we find in the attitude which assumes 'secularity' as a task to be fulfilled!

We are educators; human advancement is part and parcel of our daily apostolic commitment; we have to deal with persons, with culture, work and society; reason and faith together fashion our approach to situations; humanism shapes our spirituality! Our Family includes a secular dimension expressed in a wide variety of figures, among them the Cooperators and past-pupils. Within the Congregation itself we have the coadjutors who combine the lay state with religious consecration.

*The mission is essential for a secular consecrated vocation.*

In the document *Primo feliciter* we read: "The whole life of the members of Secular Institutes, consecrated to God by the profession of perfection, must be expressed in apostolate".<sup>12</sup>

This finds an echo in can. 713,1: "Members (of secular Institutes) express and exercise their special consecration in apostolic activity. Like a leaven, they endeavour to permeate everything with an evangelical spirit for the strengthening and growth of the Body of Christ".<sup>13</sup>

It is for this reason that the secular Institutes came into being. The recognized goodness of the world becomes, through vocation, a commitment for man. This is the most fertile perspective that derives from the mystery of the Incarnation.

We are made holy not *despite* our insertion in the world but because of it. The following of Christ finds in the worldly reality its place of realization and development.

There is a unity between Christian vocation and mission. Secular consecration does not detach from the world but brings about a deeper immersion to the extent that it grasps its sense and understands its destiny.

<sup>12</sup> Pius XII, *Primo feliciter*

<sup>13</sup> CIC 713,1



This movement stems from the desire to enter more profoundly into God's love for the world, and thus play a personal part in the actuation of that love which the Father revealed in sending his only-begotten Son into the world.

It is an interesting vision for us Salesians.

We assert that it is the mission that gives its tone to the whole of our life.<sup>14</sup> You declare that apostolic activity is the expression and realization of the consecration itself and takes in the whole of life. All those who take their inspiration from Don Bosco are considered active workers, animators and promoters of life.

With the DBV before our eyes we should grow in apostolic commitment, as required by the salesian charism and lived in different ways by each Group.

*The new relationship between Christ and the world.*

This is another perspective which helps us to understand why existence in the world can be consecrated.

In this relationship is to be found the greatest challenge to the Church and to conciliar renewal.

Paul VI, in his address of 7 December 1965, has expressed this in a rich spiritual tone which is nonetheless clear and exhilarating. "Profane lay humanism has appeared with a frightening stature, and in a certain sense has challenged the Council. The religion of the God who became man has met the religion (because that is what it amounts to) of the man who has become God.

What has happened? A clash, a struggle, an anathema? It could have happened, but in fact it did not. The old story of the Samaritan was the pattern of the spirituality of the Council, which was pervaded throughout by an immense sympathy. The revelation of human needs (and they become all the greater as

<sup>14</sup> cf. C SDB 3

the human race increases in number) fully occupied the attention of our synod. Give it credit at least for this, you modern humanists, who have renounced the transcendence of higher things, and you will recognize our new humanism: we too, we above all, are helpers and promoters of man. [...] A current of affection and admiration flowed from the Council to the modern human world".<sup>15</sup>

The expressions of the presence of the Church in the world are as numerous as are multiple the real needs of men. There are pastors, bishops and priests, dedicated to the proclamation of the Word and responsible for ecclesial communion, placed and constituted by the Holy Spirit as authentic teachers of the faith, dispensers of the mysteries which lead the faithful to holiness, defenders of men and of the poor.

There are the lay faithful who form the great majority of the people of God for whom the Church is present in all temporal realities with its witness, proclamation and efforts for their transformation.

There are the missionaries of various kinds who plant, found and build new communities of the faithful throughout the world. Their only strategy is the force of the Gospel.

Religious, in the variety of their charisms, are a living Church which recalls the future of the Kingdom and the requirements of the beatitudes, presenting in the world the ultimate perspective of the construction of the city of man.

There are you, consecrated secular persons, who represent a forward wing of the Church in the world; you express the Church's desire to insert in it the strength of the kingdom and sanctify it from within by the power of the Beatitudes.<sup>16</sup>

From an external standpoint it could seem a humble presence, and can also be confused with the world in which you insert yourselves.

<sup>15</sup> Paul VI, 7 Dec. '65

<sup>16</sup> VC 10

We are convinced as believers that in the world and in the heart of events and of history there are 'seeds' which are waiting to express all their power, both Christian and evangelical. They need a stimulus, something to bring them together and get them moving in a continual commitment.

And this is how you work as Church. Your presence could become in effect "like an experimental workshop in which the Church verifies concrete methods for its relationship with the world"<sup>17</sup>, to quote Paul VI once again.

Relationships between the Church and the world are concretely visible at the present day in areas where human history is being shaped: in the social reality, culture, politics, economy, the arts and sciences, international life, the instruments of social communication.

Who is willing to get inside this ferment?

It is the very vastness of the commitment that gives rise to the question we asked at the beginning of this section: "why do we qualify the secularity of secular Institutes with the term 'consecrated'?" We become aware that it is necessary for the accomplishment of these tasks that there be a solid and robust interior supportive structure, like an animating centre.

To avoid remaining at theoretical ideas of secularity, a force is needed to transfer man and his life to a definitive horizon which is unconditioned love, self-donation almost as a sacrificial offering, a true and total consecration, identical with that which gave rise to the Institute and its development.

Every secular Institute is the result of an overpowering desire: that of charity, of love. Consecrated life is a total dedication of oneself to God, who is loved above all things else. This totality of dedication to God, in an authentic plenitude of love, is the decisive motivation lying behind the vocation of special consecration.

God is not only given the first place but he is there as the

<sup>17</sup> Paul VI, loc. cit. 20 Sep. '72

raison d'être of consecrated life; in him the consecrated person finds himself and his relationship with the world and with others. From this the diaconate in the world takes its rise.

The heart, centre and sense of consecrated life is therefore the search for the perfection of charity, the charism par excellence, without which all the rest is of no value.<sup>18</sup>

Also for the Salesian the Church and the world are sometimes an environment for life and action; at other times they are the objective of vocational commitment; and sometimes too they form a reality difficult to bring together in unity in one's own existence and activity. They always represent the great content and motives for responsible living.

Your experience in the heart of the world with your heart in God can be a stimulus for the Salesian Family to live with greater authenticity and realism a characteristic which permeates our spirituality.

## **6.2 Secularity 'defines' consecration.**

Without the world and its reality the members of secular Institutes would have no reason for their existence. They are *in* the world and *for* the world, as are the laity in general. With the latter they share the consecration of baptism and confirmation, which constitute the title and strength for the evangelical leavening of the world, but they assume such consecration in the most radical manner possible by the profession of chastity, poverty and obedience for the love of Christ.

They are therefore in the world in a particular way which 'qualifies' their condition as Christians: they are not *of* the world. By the calling and will of God they find themselves in the world, so that everything may be restored to the primitive order of creation and redemption.

It is important that consecration be expressed. In it resides

<sup>18</sup> cf. 1 Cor 13

the leavening principle. Like Jesus, you are "consecrated and sent". But at the same time you must be able to "define" and bring out in this consecration the specific secular element. This will be advantageous to you DBVs and helpful also to all of us who call ourselves Salesian.

This perspective too stems from the mysteries of faith.

### *The Incarnation put to the test.*

Many difficulties in the understanding, acceptance and evaluation of secular Institutes in Christian communities arise from the ways in which religious experience is understood and the need there is to resolve some knotty points of faith. There are realities which must be brought together in the daily life of the Christian which can be expressed in certain double-barrelled phrases: nature and grace, existence in the world and rapport with God, life and spirituality, Christian faith and history.

The relationship between them has sometimes been portrayed and lived as separation and lack of communication, which in some cases bordered on mutual indifference. It appears to be a case of two parallel planes of human existence. Development of each is attempted without direct reference to the other. In this view Christian life is not built on elements of social life, and the latter encroaches on the former only through sheer necessity.

If you want to express this in Don Bosco's terms, you could say that the commitment to produce "a good Christian and upright citizen", in the same person and at the same point in life, does not create a problem.

In other cases the approach has been to apply a regime of external communication, considering human experience as only the field of application of ethical and spiritual demands of faith. This certainly represents a step forward as regards separation, with evident consequences in all areas of life.

In cases like this a secular consecration could have no place!

It would be necessary to wait for a new period in history when it would be possible to speak of the reassembly of the two levels. Saving grace does not build an independent world, closed to temporal life, cut off from daily reality, preserved from natural pollution. It creates instead the joyful possibility of realizing a project of life in a new and renewed form.

In this way the Church itself finds once more roles and settings more open to its intervention. Placed neither outside nor above daily reality it shares in the human travail in the construction of the earthly city by preparing, directing and guiding it towards the heavenly Jerusalem.

We Salesians have learned from St Francis de Sales the possibility, principles and manner of living a "devout" life, i.e. a life radically directed to God and shaped by him to the conditions of the world according to its own state. And at the school of Don Bosco we have learned that there is no discontinuity between work and prayer, human advancement, education and evangelization, profession and apostolate.

Fr Philip Rinaldi has passed this on to your Institute with simple indications but with extraordinarily practical results. We do not oppose elements; we bring them together. We do not separate, even when we distinguish different modes of intervention and content renewed in the light of the Gospel of salvation.

We recognize that we have, as indeed has the whole Church, a secular dimension. We know that we are a living and concrete part of the world. We rediscover our vocation of service in view of its sanctification and consecration. Educative sensitivity obliges us to study the great evangelical values immersed in the life of the world: justice, peace and love.

### *Salvation and human history.*

Words have their value for a proper understanding of reality and for communication purposes. When we use the term 'secularity', it will be well to keep in mind three different levels of reference.

The first and most immediate level is to the material reality in which we are all inserted. We are all 'secular' from the fact of having been born in this reality which has accompanied us throughout our existence. Here the term 'secular' has no special nuance either negative or positive. The world conditions our existence, to the point that all our resources are ordered to it: faculties, sentiments, intelligence and practical energies.

A second level follows from the appropriation which man makes of the world through his interventions which modify what is offered him from birth: here we have culture and humanization.

The intervention he makes consists in 'work'. It can also be called 'professionalism', practical commitment, and by many other terms. It results in the building of a physical environment, a kind of society, a communal organization of life and relationships. From this standpoint too we are all seculars, even though with different responsibilities and especially with different levels of awareness.

The third level involves the Christian life, with religious commitment and the salvation of the world, willed and fulfilled by Christ.

As believers we assume the responsibility of 'sanctifying' or 'consecrating' the secular reality, of specifying its reference to God, of continuing and mediating the event of Christ, of saving it with him from sin, of orienting it towards its fulfilment.

All of this together forms human history, within which there is the presence of God and is enacted Christ's mystery. Let us now therefore speak of the history of salvation.

These are not two parallel stories. Together they realize a common process for the advancement and salvation of man and society, without confusion but also without separation.

Salvation "is already present here on earth, received and mediated by men; they, the members of the earthly city, are

called to form the family of the children of God even in this present phase of the history of mankind and to increase it continually until the Lord comes".<sup>19</sup>

The secular condition therefore is to be understood as a property of man but willed by God, in which his grace is active. It represents the normal setting in which God loves man and brings about man's salvation.

Today's theology proposes a vision as evocative as it is joyful: grace comes not only after the creation but precedes it and is its cause. In this effusive movement, of communication, of self-giving, of this association of other living beings in his own life, in this turning of God to man as a grace, arises creation itself! In other words, we human creatures on our arrival in this world are already marked by grace.

In things, in man, in the world, there is a certain order, a capacity, an affinity, a fact of having been made to live with God through his grace. Sin has made and makes this difficult, and this is a reality we cannot ignore. But we recognize that the world, in so far as it is man's world, was made to be a support so that man be directed towards God. And the world cannot be called human unless it helps man to attain the fullness of his encounter with God.

The consecration of secular persons bears witness to these real possibilities. Often they remain hidden to the eyes of the majority in the world. But those who live in a secularity shaped by consecration, i.e. assumed in a specific vocation, recognize and are able to discern the God who is present but hidden.

In this way secularity provides contents of spirituality, and prompts ways of involvement to consecration itself.

<sup>19</sup> cf. GS 40



## 7. The Mission of consecrated secular persons.

### *The animation of temporal realities.*

The mission or collaboration in salvation of lay believers, present as leaven in secular realities, is designated by various names which have already clear references.

In the dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*<sup>20</sup> we find the expression "the laity consecrate the world itself to God"; in the decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, we read the words "the Christian animation of the temporal order"<sup>21</sup>; in the document on the Church in the modern world, *Gaudium et spes*, finally, this need is expressed in the words: "impressing the divine law on the affairs of the earthly city".<sup>22</sup>

And then in the Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici* there is an ample section describing the setting of the presence and work of the lay faithful. It is headed: "To live the Gospel, serving the person and society".<sup>23</sup>

In n.34 we read: "Without doubt a mending of the Christian fabric of society is urgently needed in all parts of the world. But for this to come about, what is needed is to first remake the Christian fabric of the ecclesial community itself in these countries and nations where indifference, secularism and atheism are widely spread".<sup>24</sup>

The process of ecclesial reflection in the period following the Council has highlighted the fact that the worldly and secular realities (in the sense already explained) are not an obstacle in the plan of salvation, and not even an extraneous element or one which is juxtaposed; they represent what the body is to the soul.

They are part of the loving design of God the Father, in so

<sup>20</sup> cf. LG 34

<sup>21</sup> cf. AA 7

<sup>22</sup> GS 43

<sup>23</sup> cf. CL 36-44

<sup>24</sup> cf. CL 34

far as they are instruments and settings for salvific Providence. They were assumed by the Word in the Incarnation to express in a human manner man's relationship with God and to collaborate in his plan of redemption.

And then the work of the Spirit sets in motion human forces for the transformation of the world, as in the first creation he prompted the passage from chaos to cosmos.

The realities which some call profane, in line with a certain idea of what is sacred, have an objective linked with salvation and can be directed towards it. They are "sacred" on account of the sign of God who is in them, in line with their particular nature. But they are made "sacred" (consecrated) to the extent that they are consciously placed by man under the influence of the presence of God.

There is nothing automatic nor merely ritualistic in all of this. It is up to man, to the believer, to the consecrated person sustained and reinvigorated by the Spirit, to help the world to open up to God and to the salvation that stems from rapport with him.

What we have said means that we have to look at profane realities with an attitude of respect on account of the good they represent, recognizing their legitimate authority in their particular order and with respect to their proper objectives.<sup>25</sup>

It means also taking the natural order seriously, working for its perfecting because it expresses the positive part of what is inscribed within it.

In these ways is realized, with similarity of involvement but diversity of emphasis, the commitment of the laity and of consecrated secular persons in the world.

For the latter the reflection of Paul VI is valid: "In this way, from your consecrated life, also your activity in the world – be it individual or collective, in professional areas in which you are committed either individually or in groups – receives a

<sup>25</sup> cf. GS 36

marked orientation towards God, since in a certain way it too is involved and affected by your same consecration".<sup>26</sup>

It is typical of lay people to be concerned in the first instance about putting temporal things in order so that they respond to their proper end and are placed in history for the service of man, working from within and in accordance with the laws proper to their own dynamism. Consecrated persons have as their primary aim that of witnessing to the necessity, primacy and reality of the presence of God in life, or recalling the indispensable nature of Christ and of the spirit of the Gospel for the salvation of the temporal order.

This is expressed in the Exhortation *Vita consecrata* in n.10, the only paragraph dedicated explicitly to secular Institutes: "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 transform the world from within by the power of the Beatitudes".<sup>27</sup>

*Professionalism forms part of the consecration.*

The areas I spoke of earlier (culture, social and political work and development) are not aspects which can be left to chance. They have laws which must be observed, because they are designed by Providence as the road which leads to a meeting with God. By professionalism we mean work carried out with responsibility, with attention to quality, to the sense of secular finality, capacity for service and collaboration.

Here consecration becomes binding, and also something specific as regards the secular laity. "Although you are in the world, your situation differs in a certain way from that of the simple laity in the sense that you are committed in the same worldly values, but as consecrated persons: i.e. not so much for affirming

<sup>26</sup> Paul VI, loc. cit. 20 Sep. '72

<sup>27</sup> VC 10

the intrinsic validity of human things in themselves, but for explicitly orienting them according to the evangelical beatitudes".<sup>28</sup>

Those who are consecrated bear everywhere the seal of the Spirit. Their professionalism therefore has two aspects, both of them equally important and meaningful for defining in a more complete manner the sense of their life: competence in their particular secular occupation, and competence in spirituality (or life in Christ) through experience and reflection.

For a consecrated member of a secular Institute the spiritual life consists also and mainly in taking up responsibly one's own work, the social relationships common in the world, life's environment in its various expressions, as particular forms of collaboration in the coming of the Kingdom of heaven. And at the same time it means being ready to explain the reason for one's own hope and options, and giving guidance to those who seek it.

## **8. An original salesian spirituality.**

As I approach my conclusion I offer you some incentives for a life "according to the spirit" lived with a salesian style in an authentic consecrated secularity.

I do not have in mind either a complete treatise nor a definitive schematic arrangement. That would require us to return to preferential items and the content and form of the mission, to rise again to the heart of Christ and to pastoral charity. These things you have already formulated in your Constitutions, taking in doctrinal inspirations and summarizing lived experiences.

The spirituality represents the synthesis in and of personal and community life. You DBVs are asked to keep together three inseparable aspects: personal sanctification, the construction of the Kingdom, and the consecration of the world. It is

<sup>28</sup> Paul VI, loc. cit. 20 Sep. '72

not an easy task! You have already learned that the salesian spirit is the element which binds them together in a particular and original physiognomy which is manifested in life and activity. From this flows the grace of unity: a gift which comes with the vocation, but which needs to be consciously cultivated.

I want now only to emphasize some traits connected with consecrated secularity, the point we chose as the focus of our reflection.

Being inserted full-time and with full rights in the world constitutes a clear indication for the utilization of daily life. And then secular professionalism leads to adaptation to times, rhythms, needs and expressions, which tend towards what is "concrete". From these two points stem some important indications for your spiritual style.

*Be attentive to little items in human history and to the work of the Spirit in the heart of ordinary people.*

Daily life needs to be viewed with a unified vision. It seems to be made up of so many bits and pieces: work, meetings, news items, personal elements, plans and sufferings!

In daily life things happen which link us with God, and others which lead us to men. The assemblage of the different fragments needs continual updating; it cannot be put off to a distant future, nor can every item be foreseen so as to protect what has been already achieved.

There are promptings which come from afar, from above, from experts; but there are also quiet whisperings from close at hand, from the poor, from those rich in wisdom and grace.

All this has to be brought together in a unity of love: the perceived love of God and the love you give to others. It is a matter of seeing through the eyes of Christ, and of spirit – the spirit of sympathy, of understanding, of close relationship.

In daily life there are aspects which anticipate and build the future: they are signs of the times. To be alert to how as many

people as possible live is to embrace the invitation of the Spirit and make certain options.

Salesian experience shows that the Oratory as a criterion for presence and action is the ideal environment for detecting the signs of the times. I am referring not to its structure but to its style and spirit. Free association with other people, listening to what they say, the possibility of detecting immediately the needs of youngsters and of adults and of giving them a suitable reply, the ability to replan proposals and initiatives – all these things give substance to a spirituality of daily life in the style of Don Bosco.

*Make of your multiple daily events an experience of the Kingdom, hidden in the warp and weft of life.*

The daily round means incarnation. In your words, gestures and actions, the grace that is within you becomes visible and expresses your consecration. By inculturating it and making it intelligible at the present day, you make ordinary things become significant and small signs eloquent with the expression of sense and humanity.

There is need perhaps to train oneself to spiritual discernment which can penetrate contemporary perplexities, the widespread fragmentation of the present day, and the precarious element which affects everything. There is also need to look beyond normal horizons, to do a bit of dreaming, to muse on new things and new possibilities.

Paul VI reminded everyone of this in *Evangelii nuntiandi* and referred explicitly to secular Institutes what he said in n.70: “(to make effective) all those latent Christian and evangelical possibilities which already exist and operate in the world”.<sup>29</sup>

The ability to link events with their root; the openness to what is new and previously unknown, like the inrush of grace

<sup>29</sup> EN 70

that leads towards unity; the urge to be able to express the inexpressible that lies in one's own heart and in the heart of reality; internal enrichment, not as an accumulation of new items but as growth in the germination of seeds that have been sown; these are the things which transform the material elements of life into the sense of living.

And today we all need to rediscover the significance of history and its events which we are living and building, both by our presence and our absence.

Personally I am inclined to think that the "reserve" of a consecrated secular person is linked with daily life.

The members of a secular Institute are first and foremost human beings and Christians like all others. They are and want to be able to get on with everyone. Pius XII had already said in 1949 to a group of consecrated seculars: "You are consecrated to God, recruited for the service of Christ; the pact has been ratified. God knows it, the Church knows it, and you know it. But the world does not know it, but feels the beneficial effects which stem from the Christian substance of your existence and apostolate". The "reserve" therefore belongs to the level of "apostolic discretion" which consecrated men and women are called to live daily in their profession. The situation of secularization in which the world is at present living must not be overlooked; nor must be forgotten the need to remain as the leaven hidden in the mass of dough.

Everyone knows that if a mass ferments it is due to the leaven: that is quite certain! Everyone too can see that there are some who allow themselves to be guided by criteria which are commonly overlooked or deliberately ignored. All are also able to estimate how much of the Gospel, or of what is new, abides in the heart of some believers and is expressed in their actions. But this requires a process which unifies acts interiorly and exteriorly to the extent of showing the inspiration which is at their origin. It can be said, therefore, that consecrated secularity characterizes and qualifies, more than by ma-

terial activity, by the significance, the messages, the questions, the incentives or the new images of life it manages to provoke.

*Build up a fabric of understandings and relationships, of dialogue and seeking, of sympathy and evangelical communion.*

The consecrated secular person is and makes himself the travelling companion of his brothers and sisters.

He does not seek isolation and eschews marginalization.

He overcomes self-seeking and expressions of individualism.

He is able to make of existing differences a rich value for all.

He makes himself professionally qualified, because he knows that competence opens the doors of the intelligence, and consequently also of the heart.

He fosters dialogue and is a worker for communion.

It is almost a requirement inscribed in the vocation itself. "Your secularity prompts you to give special emphasis – as distinct from religious – to the relationship with the world. This relationship is not only a sociological condition, an external fact, but rather an attitude: to be present in the world, knowing that you are responsible for its service and for shaping it to God".<sup>30</sup>

In point of fact, the rich nature of the secular state which we have been describing requires the depth of consecration to enable it to confront prevarications and corruption which are always possible. "The consecration you have made places you in the world as witnesses to the supremacy of spiritual and eschatological values, i.e. of the absolute character of your Christian charity which, the greater it is, will make the more relative the values of the world, while at the same time it will be helped by a right intention on your own part and that of your fellow members".<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Paul VI, 25th anniv. of *Provida Mater*

<sup>31</sup> Paul VI to Sups. Sec. Inst. 20 Sep. '72



## Conclusion

And now that I have reached the end of this letter in which I wanted to focus on the consecrated lay state, I have become aware that from the reflections we have made, certain points have been highlighted which it would be worth our while to examine more deeply: the manner of promoting vocations, points to be emphasized in initial and ongoing formation, the maturing of spirituality, but especially the spiritual assistance you have asked for at every level<sup>32</sup> and which the Salesian Congregation has undertaken to provide<sup>33</sup>, because of the significance of your presence in the charism and Salesian Family.

These are tasks for the time ahead which we shall share according to our respective responsibilities. The event we are celebrating finds us therefore in a healthy state of dynamic fidelity to a vocation which seeks always to renew its response to the Lord.

This future we entrust to Mary Help of Christians. You look upon her as the "model of consecrated life in secularity",<sup>34</sup> because "accepting with faith the mystery of Christ in daily life, she lived her consecration to God with nothing that distinguished her from the women of her time, and found in work a way of life and of sanctification".<sup>35</sup>



<sup>32</sup> cf. Reg. DBV 20-22

<sup>33</sup> cf. Reg. SDB 40

<sup>34</sup> C DBV 11

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*