

THE SECULAR INSTITUTE OF THE DON BOSCO VOLUNTEERS IN THE PHILIPPINES

Agnes B. Paulino*

1. Historical background

In 1947, Pope Pius XII formally recognized secular institutes as a state of perfection – a true form of consecrated life in the Church. The Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia* expressed this recognition and gave the institutes their proper name and their own particular law. One year later, the motu proprio *Primo Feliciter* more clearly stressed the uniqueness of the institutes' character – a secular character – and their role as Christian leaven in the world. Immediately following *Primo Feliciter*, was the Instruction *Cum Sanctissimus* which further developed and clarified points, particularly from *Provida Mater*.

Canon 710 defines as secular institute as follows: A secular institute is an institute of consecrated life in which the Christian faithful living in the world strive for the perfection of charity and work for the sanctification of the world especially from within.

Secular institutes share with religious that total consecration of life recognized by the Church. Their distinguishing characteristic, consecrated secularity, is reflected by speaking of members living in the world, and seeking its sanctification from within. The latter phrase suggests the image of leaven appearing explicitly in canon 713. Pope Paul VI highlighted the notion of consecrated secularity when he addressed the institutes on the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Provida Mater*. He wished them to be an example and model of the spirit the Council wished to infuse in the Church – overcoming secularism and rendering the Church leaven and soul in the world:

“The world has need of your witness! Humanity is waiting for the Church to increasingly incarnate this new attitude before the world, which in you, in virtue of your consecrated secularity must shine forth in a most special way”.

* Miss Agnes B. Paulino is a member of the Salesian Family. She does accounting work for the Salesian Seminary and Center of Studies in Manila.

Pope John Paul II picked up the same theme when he addressed institute members in 1980. He spoke of their “hallmark... to change the world from the inside”.

“You are in the world, but not just in the social sense, classified as secular, but put there, personally, every bit of you. Being there must be a thing of the heart, what you really mean and want. So you must consider yourselves part of the world, committed to the sanctification of the world, with full acceptance of its rights, its claims upon you, claims inseparable from the autonomy of the world, of its values, of its laws”.

A member’s canonical condition within the people of God is not changed. Members of institutes remain lay persons as provided for by Canon 711.

The first two paragraphs of Canon 713 follow:

The members of these institutes express and exercise their own consecration in their apostolic activity and like a leaven they strive to imbue all things with the spirit of the gospel for the strengthening and growth of the Body of Christ.

Lay members share in the Church’s evangelizing task in the world and of the world through their witness of a Christian life and fidelity toward their consecration, and through their efforts to order temporal things according to God and inform the world by the power of the gospel. Also, they cooperate in serving the ecclesial community, according to their particular secular way of life.

Pope Pius XII referred to the members as light and salt in a dark and savorless world.

Further, the entire life of the members of secular institutes must become apostolate. This apostolate of the secular institutes is to be faithfully exercised not only in the world, but as it were, as originating in the world and consequently in its profession, activities, forms, places and circumstances it must correspond to the secular condition.

While some institutes have a specific work (e.g. catechists, the medical profession), most frequently the lay institute members are immersed in the midst of others as farmers, lawyers, teachers, nurses, factory workers, civil servants. The quality of their consecrated life reflects on their everyday situation. What pertains to the role of the laity in the Church is theirs.

2. The Don Bosco Volunteers

On 18 December 1850, John Bosco laid the foundations for a vastly expanding religious family, and he called the first group of followers "Salesians".

In the eyes of Don Bosco, the first group was only a part of the greater number of "Salesian Promoters". From 1858, he stated clearly that he wanted a definite division of his family of helpers into two categories: "interns" who lived permanently with him in a community, and "externs" who lived in their own homes and helped in his mission as best they could.

However, to gain definitive approval for his Rules, he had to delete the chapter on the "externs". Nevertheless, the original idea did not die. It was left in the hands of Fr. Philip Rinaldi.

In 1910, on the occasion of the first Congress of the Alumnae of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, fourteen young ladies publicly expressed to Fr. Rinaldi "the desire to unite themselves more closely with Don Bosco, to live his spirit, to acquire a perfect knowledge of and to put into practice in the world the very work performed by the Salesians". One of them was to prepare a rule. This first effort failed to meet the needs of the people who must live in the world.

On 20 May 1917, Fr. Rinaldi was able to take a new initiative in Turin. Three young women, Luisa Carpanera, Francesca Riccardi, and Maria Verzotti met him to start the Association of Zelatrici. For more than two years, Fr. Rinaldi carefully nurtured the group with his wise instructions and practical directives in their monthly conferences. The "Cuaderno Carpanera" is the compilation of these conferences diligently recorded by Luisa Carpanera.

In 1928, the Association had 16 members. When Fr. Rinaldi died in 1931, it declined for more than a decade.

Luisa Carpanera rekindled interest in 1943 when she turned over to Fr. Domenico Garneri her book containing the conferences of Fr. Rinaldi. Fr. Garneri tracked down some of the first members and began to revive the Association. With the help of Fr. Luzzi, he was able to begin two groups outside of Turin, in Bagnolo and in Milan. However, the former enthusiasm and vitality that existed when Fr. Rinaldi directed the groups was gone.

Fr. Renato Ziggiotti became the Superior General of the Salesian Society on 1 August 1952. The situation of the association was presented

to him on 3 August 1953. In the summer of 1955, Fr. Ziggiotti arranged for the preparation of an outline of a new rule with the ideas of Fr. Rinaldi, updated and adapted to the times. Members of the three existing groups met in Turin in the afternoon of 6 January 1956. The Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians gave their approval. Oblate-Cooperators of St. John Bosco became its new name.

On 19 March 1959, the Central Council renamed the growing association Don Bosco Volunteers. The title clearly indicates its lay character.

Cardinal Maurilius Fossati, Cardinal Archbishop of Turin issued a decree on 31 January 1964 recognizing the Don Bosco Volunteers as a "Pious Association". A decree by the new Archbishop of Turin, Cardinal Michael Pellegrino, established the Don Bosco Volunteers as a Diocesan Secular Institute on 31 January 1971. In the summer of 1977, the first General Assembly took place. The assembly revised the Constitution and for the first time, elected the Central Council.

Pope Paul VI placed the final seal of approval on the Institute on 21 July 1978 by establishing the Don Bosco Volunteers as a Secular Institute of Pontifical Right. The Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes issued the official decree on 5 August 1978, one day before Pope Paul VI passed away.

On 14 June 1990, the Holy See gave the definitive approval of the Constitution.

The seed planted by Don Bosco and nurtured by Fr. Rinaldi has blossomed in 173 Groups and Sub-groups worldwide.

As of 31 January 2004, there are 1,324 Don Bosco Volunteers in the following continents:

Africa (19)

America (450)

Asia (127)

Europe (726)

Oceania (2)

Of the 1,324 Volunteers, 975 are perpetually consecrated, 232 with temporary consecration and 117 aspirants.

3. The Don Bosco Volunteers in the Philippines

3.1. Establishment of groups/sub-groups

3.1.1. Metro Manila group

The Central Council of the Secular Institute of the Don Bosco Volunteers based in Rome approved the establishment of groups in the Philippines in July 1972. Fr. Luigi Ferrari, the Provincial, entrusted to Fr. Valeriano Barbero the task of recruiting the first members of the group. As Acting Rector of Don Bosco Technical Institute, Makati, Fr. Valeriano Barbero found five teachers in the Primary Department of the school who became the first aspirants in the Philippines.

Fr. William Balocco, Rector of the Provincial House, was the first Ecclesiastical Assistant. He had the primary responsibility in the formation of the members.

A whole day spent in recollection at the Mater Dei School in Calamba, Laguna was the first meeting of the group on 23 July 1972. Subsequent formation meetings in the Provincial House were held every second, third, and fourth Fridays of the month. The Three-Year Formation Program of the Aspirantate covered the following:

- First Year – Formation of Personality
- Second Year – Formation of the Christian
- Third Year – Formation of the Consecrated Soul

The initial formation conference held on 16 August 1972 dealt with the following topics:

- 1) Brief Outline of the History of the Institute
- 2) Brief Outline of the Government and Structure of the Institute
- 3) Brief Explanation of the Nature of Secular Institute

At the end of the school year, Fr. Balocco was assigned to Don Bosco in Tarlac. Fr. Lazaro Revilla, the Provincial Secretary and former Novice Master replaced Fr. Balocco as the Ecclesiastical Assistant of the group.

The newly constructed Provincial House in Better Living Subdivision, Parañaque became the new venue for the weekly formation meetings. Another Don Bosco teacher joined the group at the start of the school year.

The First Annual Retreat was at the Redemptorist Convent, Nevel Hills, Cebu City, from 26 to 31 December 1973.

On the third year of its existence (1974-1975), two new members joined the group. One was a Don Bosco teacher and another one was a bank manager, the first one recruited outside of Don Bosco Makati.

On the Feast of Mary Help of Christians in 1975, the first five aspirants in the Institute in the Philippines made their First Temporary Profession. This was the highlight of the Annual Retreat held in the Canossian School in Lipa, Batangas. Fr. Luigi Ferrari, Provincial was the main celebrant at the mass of the first profession. Fr. Peter Zago, Vice Provincial, Fr. Valeriano Barbero, Provincial Economist, Fr. Joseph Savina, Rector of Don Bosco Makati, Fr. Jose Reinoso, Retreat Preacher, and Fr. Lazaro Revilla, Ecclesiastical Assistant of the Makati group concelebrated.

In 1976, following the first temporary profession of five members, the Center appointed the first Local Council, the governing body of the group. There were four council members: the Local Directress, the Delegate for the Aspirants, the Secretary-Treasurer, and the Ecclesiastical Assistant who did not have any right to vote.

The meeting venue moved to the Pius XII Catholic Center, Manila. The monthly days of recollection were either at Manresa Retreat House, Quezon City or at the Colegio de Sta. Rosa in Makati.

3.1.2. Victorias group

Past pupils of the Oratory of the Salesian Sisters comprised the nucleus of the group in Victorias, Negros Occidental. Sr. Fosca Barco, FMA introduced to them the idea of a consecrated secular life. Six responded favorably. With the six aspirants, it became a Sub-group by 13 July 1973.

Fr. Joseph Giaime, as the newly appointed Ecclesiastical Assistant conducted the initial formation meeting on 31 May 1973. The members met for regular formation meetings and monthly days of recollection in the Chaplain's office at St. Joseph's convent. They also participated in the first annual retreat from 26 to 31 December 1973 in Cebu City.

On 30 May 1976, five aspirants from the Sub-group made their first temporary profession. After this, the Center appointed a Local Delegate. Likewise, Fr. Remo Bati, the new Rector of Don Bosco, Victorias became the new Ecclesiastical Assistant.

3.1.3. Canlubang group

Fr. Lazaro Revilla presented the idea of a consecrated secular life to a teacher and a telephone operator in Canlubang on 13 May 1973. Mother Mary Boccardo, the Mother Superior of Canossa Academy in Calamba invited one of their teachers and a librarian to join the group.

On 24 July 1973, Fr. Adolf Faroni, designated as the Ecclesiastical Assistant, gave the first weekly conference to the new members. Mass was celebrated after the conference. The venue was the convent of the Salesian Sisters in Canlubang.

Two Volunteers were able to participate in the first annual retreat from 26 to 31 December 1973 in Cebu City. Three of the original members made their first temporary profession on 24 May 1976 after the annual retreat in Manresa Retreat House, Quezon City. Fr. Pietro Schinetti, the Central Ecclesiastical Assistant gave conferences regarding the Institute. He was the author of "La Mia Vita", the commentary on the 1977 Constitutions.

Canlubang became a Sub-group in 1976. The Central Council appointed a Local Delegate with a three-year term.

3.1.4. Cebu group

In 1977, four Volunteers from Victorias conducted a Christian Family Life Seminar to the members of the various religious organizations in the parish of Pasil, Cebu City. Fr. Joseph Giaime, the former Ecclesiastical Assistant of Victorias was the newly appointed Rector of the parish. When entrusted to the Salesians, the parish of Pasil was a slum area.

Two Volunteers decided to return to Pasil and work as catechists and social workers. They agreed to go back to Victorias for the monthly day of recollections. However, with the entry of new aspirants, Cebu later became a Sub-group.

3.1.5. Tarlac sub-group

In 1975, Fr. William Balocco became the Rector of Don Bosco in Tarlac. With his experience as the first Ecclesiastical Assistant of the Makati Group, he began to establish a group in Tarlac. Two ladies an-

swered the call. Two more joined the following year and the Center declared it as Tarlac Sub-group.

The life of the Sub-group was short-lived. Only one among the four aspirants persevered in her vocation. The numerous responsibilities of Fr. Balocco left him little time to attend to the formation meetings of the volunteers. With only a Volunteer left, the absence of new prospects, and the lack of Salesian assistance forced the Center to suppress the Sub-group of Tarlac in 1985. The remaining Volunteer became a member of the Metro-Manila Group.

3.2. Consolidation of the groups/sub-groups into a zone

Under the 1971 Constitutions, six consecrated Volunteers form a Group. (Art. 90) When there are less than six, a Sub-group is established. (Art. 96) The Central Council can establish a Region when there is an adequate number of Groups and Sub-groups. (Art. 81) However, it may establish a Zone “when distance or too small a number of groups would make it impossible or premature to establish a Region”. (Art. 87) In all cases, it is essential that the “necessary spiritual assistance is assured”.

From 1972, the Philippines belonged to the Zone consisting of Hongkong, Macau, and Thailand.

By 1978, the Central Council created an independent Philippine Zone after the First General Assembly of the Institute held in Rome, Italy in the summer of 1977. The Zone Council consisted of a Zone-in-Charge, two councilors and an Ecclesiastical Assistant with no right to vote.

4. Transition of the zone into a region

4.1. Asia I

In 1989, the Third General Assembly held in Frascati, Italy reformulated the Constitutions. The new Constitutions no longer provided for a Zone. The Groups and Sub-groups now form a Region. The need and the number of the Volunteers of the Region determine the number of councilors who will assist the Regional President in the animation of the Region.

With this development, the Philippine Zone automatically became the Philippine Region, officially designated as Asia I. The other Groups and Sub-groups in the Asian region were combined to form Asia II.

4.2. Philippines-Australia (Fila)

In 1998, the Central Council incorporated the Sub-group of Victoria, Australia to the Philippine Region. Previously, the lone Volunteer of Australia was dependent directly on the Center from 1994.

5. The region today

Thirty-two years after it was founded, there are now 56 Don Bosco Volunteers in the Region: 42 Perpetually Consecrated, 9 with Temporary Consecration and 5 Aspirants.

They are in the following groups in the Philippines: 21 in Metro Manila, 16 in Victorias, 9 in Cebu, 8 in Canlubang. There are 2 in Victoria, Australia.

Each group has a schedule of formation and sisterly encounters and monthly days of recollection. The Regional Council initiates the Annual Retreat and Course of Spiritual Culture. The Regional President and some members of the Regional Council visit the groups for the canonical visitation each year.

Based on the suggested topics provided by the Center, the Region has come up with its Program of Formation.

The Region sent representatives to the five General Assemblies held in 1977, 1983, 1989, 1995 and 2001. With the expansion in the membership, the representation with voting rights grew from one in 1977, two in 1983 and 1989, and three in 1995 and 2001.

6. Prospects of the region

Growth is the biggest challenge facing the Region today: growth in the number of Don Bosco Volunteers and growth in their spirituality that must be evident in the daily life witnessing.*

* REFERENCES: Provincial Report on the Progress of the Secular Institute of the Don Bosco Volunteers – Philippines Province (July 1978–July 1979); Constitutions (1971, 1977, 1983 Modifications, 1989).