

SECULAR INSTITUTES: III

'Not of the World'

TERESA MELIA

Vows

VOWS in Secular Institutes are not recognized by the Church as the public vows of religion, but they are more than the private vows of individuals. They are termed 'semi-public' or 'social', indicating a contract not only with God, but with the specific Institute in which the member takes the vows. Thus the member is bound to the Institute, and the Institute becomes responsible for the member.

As a rule, the vows are taken for a period which varies according to the Institute, and after temporary vows the member usually takes final vows. Whereas religious may not have a period of temporary profession extending beyond six years, this period of trial in Secular Institutes can be extended by particular constitutions, or by the lawful superior, to ten years. This is because of the absence of the common life, and because of more prolonged and more direct contact with the outside world, the process of formation in Secular Institutes will ordinarily be slower than in the more sheltered religious congregations.

Poverty

Poverty detaches only that it may attach us to the one supreme good. It is only a means to an end, and should be voluntarily embraced in order to reach this end, union with God. For to a soul that is stripped of all attachments, God reveals himself. This inner attitude of detachment in the midst of the world is only possible and fruitful if Christ is the living ideal of poverty. In the poverty of Christ we see a simplicity, adaptability and serenity that are true characteristics of one who is detached, and should shine in members of Secular Institutes. And it is only by love of Christ poor, Christ detached, that the practice of this evangelical counsel can be kept a deep-souled reality instead of deteriorating into a ~~state~~ state of financial calculations and petty restrictions.

This desire to be like our Lord must flower in external relations with things and people. So in Secular Institutes, members renounce the free and independent use of temporal goods. They retain full ownership and the canonical capacity of acquiring further property. But their use of temporal goods is dependent on superiors. Thus where individuals are earning an income, they usually handle their own earnings, provide for personal needs, avoiding caprice on the one hand, and scrupulosity on the other; set aside a certain sum as reserve fund, and contribute to the funds of the Institute an amount normally fixed by the Governing Council. In some Institutes a fixed sum is allowed each member and permission is needed to spend above that sum. A reasonable amount may be spent on entertainment, though naturally a dedicated person in the world neither needs nor wants so much entertainment as the ordinary secular. Where charity or family or friendship require it, they will give alms or gifts. Here a well-balanced and faith-directed outlook is necessary. There should be no meanness, no stinginess, no dowdiness, nor any extravagance or luxury in members of Secular Institutes. Periodically, an account is rendered to the superior who thus controls expenditure.

A good deal of common sense is requisite in living the vows in the world, but more than all a very personal love of our Lord. There must be in the vow of poverty a great trust in God's providence so as to avoid anxiety over temporal goods. For poverty is a mystical reality, while economy takes place, as Régamy says, 'on the superficial, utilitarian plane of existence'. Grace to fulfil the vow is never lacking to those who ask, and God will show them how to become daily more and more detached from everything they love, no matter what it is—for the heart is forever forging links that bend it now to this, now to that. Against the predominant spirit of avarice and materialism in the world, the spirit of evangelical poverty should strive valiantly. It is so easy to become influenced by this worship of mammon and infected with its poison. As St Thomas says, 'it is very difficult to possess things and not to love them'. A daily donation of self will in time teach those dedicated to God that there are many things they considered indispensable that can really be done without for love of him. If they never *feel* their vow of poverty, there is something wrong, for though it should free

them from undue solicitude, they should be glad at times to suffer the exigencies of poverty, realizing they are in some small way sharing in the life of Christ.

Chastity

Members of Secular Institutes being bound by the law of celibacy may never marry. (Certain Institutes have *associated* members who may marry but they can never belong to the Institute as a fully dedicated member.) Freed from the responsibilities of family life, they can undertake a higher service and make a more complete gift of self. It is the exclusive engagement of one's love with the love of God. Without this very vital love of Christ, an absolute, all-absorbing love, chastity will remain a frustration rather than a completion, a desert rather than a fertile plain. His infinite love demands a total response, and the ability to make this response is given by God. So that chastity, while being a gift to God, is in truth a gift from God. The donation of self cannot be accomplished but in Christ and by the power of Christ.

Such a consecration of one's whole being to God cannot be made on the shifting sands of a sentimental devotion. The rock of prayer and faith is the foundation. To be in love with God means knowing him, and to know him demands a deep searching of the Gospels, there to study his mind, his interests, his whole personality. In general, man is at his best when he is in love. And sanctity is the logical outcome of being in love with God, to which high privilege those are called who make the vow of chastity.

The initial choice, however, does not sky-rocket them into a heavenly orbit where they are no longer troubled by the attractions of human love. It is only little by little that the vow of virginity impresses itself into one's life, and this only in the measure of an ever renewed donation to our Lord. For the renunciations imposed are very real and likely to be more acutely felt by one being in the world than by one in the cloister. Is it possible to live in the world in interior solitude without becoming barren? And if one gives oneself to people in genuine love and interest—as an apostle must—how remain unattached? Certainly there *are* difficulties, and facts must be faced with complete candour. But an excessive fear would be injurious to a consecrated

soul. 'The right hand of the Lord upholdeth me. I shall not die but live.' With generosity and fidelity to prayer on the part of the individual, God will bring them unscathed through the fires of human relationships. The fire of Christ's love in the heart must be the all-consuming one.

Human safeguards are also necessary—an enlightened training, a certain reserve even while giving people genuine affection and service, and a self-denial more exacting than that required of the Christian without vows. Candour with one's confessor and superior is essential. But above all, love of Christ, for it is an uncalculating love of him that will keep all other loves in their rightful place. For there must be love in a life dedicated to the apostolate. Virginity must be like our Lady's—fruitful and maternal. But maternity means labour and sorrows: these are the purifications of the sensibility of the heart. Chastity must be rooted in love, and if chastity does not open the heart more to all men then it is a sterile sham and of no more value spiritually than the virtue of the vestal virgins.

In the world of today, when people are so de-personalized, so stripped of individuality, so mass-produced in habits and outlook, there is a crying need for genuine, spontaneous warm friendship and love of the individual. By human contacts, those in Secular Institutes must provide an antidote to this cold, machine-like generalization. Entering by their neighbour's door, they should lead them out through their own. The vow of chastity is the means of giving oneself not to one, but to all. So many have the wrong idea that chastity means a giving up of love. On the contrary, it is a giving *to* Love in Person that they may give love to persons.

Obedience

Primarily obedience must be interior, supernatural, its pivot the will of God. As an apostle working with and for Christ, the consecrated soul must always strive to be able to say 'I have come, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me'. To keep the heart and soul focused on this fundamental truth demands a deep spirit of faith. Indeed, without faith there can be no obedience in its real sense.

Obedience is always rendered to God; to persons, only because and in so far as they represent God, from whom all authority

flows. Secular Institutes, as groups, owe obedience to their bishop; the members of Institutes to their superiors and according to their constitutions. Since members often live and work at a distance from their superiors the vow of obedience requires a somewhat different attitude of mind from that in religious congregations. An adult conception of obedience, mature judgment and personal initiative are very necessary qualities in members of Secular Institutes. Though there will be less danger of externalism and routine—a danger in conventual life—there will be the danger of too much stress on independence. To combat this and to ensure a true spirit of obedience even when they have, as frequently happens, to use their own initiative and make their own decisions, they must cultivate a spirit of welcome, of openness to God's grace. 'My lots are in thy hands.' Not in a merely passive sense, but in the context of generous self-donation and alert awareness of God's all-directing love. The aim of superiors as well as of subordinates must be the fulfilment of God's will for them. There must be collaboration between members and their superior. A superior makes a travesty of her power if she does not use all human means to find out what is God's will for each individual in her care. The supernatural gift of counsel does not exclude the use of natural means. On the other hand, the subject should not expect sure guidance if she makes no effort to be frank and candid with her superior, making known her basic difficulties, and any serious problems. Trust from superiors, loyalty from subjects, and in both a sincere seeking after the will of God.

The rule of Secular Institutes is not one of convent regularity transferred to the world: it is so constituted as to be lived *in* the world. Consequently, for the most part, rules of Institutes are free of details. They provide a solid framework on which to build one's life in an occupation. For no apostle can kindle a fire by confining himself to a series of rules to be gone through. That is only laying the sticks. The fire must flame through the spirit of prayer, of union with God. In the degree that they are absent from their superiors, members of Secular Institutes must live in the presence of God who is their Father and guide.

Subjects living in the world may be recalled to the centre for administrative purposes of the Institute, or for motives of prudence. It is always the subject's duty to obey generously, knowing that

God has no need of special *works* but only of one work—our sanctification.

Striving after the life of perfection in the world, dedicated souls will draw to the full from the wealth of the Church in the Mass, the sacraments, the liturgy, and deepen their interior lives by prayer, the vows, and the practice of an all-embracing charity which demands humility and self-denial. They must indeed be in the world but not of the world.

The Centre

It would be an illusion to believe that the apostolate is always carried on in a blaze of zeal and fervour. In the daily monotony of work and the constant striving after perfection, 'weariness in well-doing' can descend like a November fog to chill and blind the soul. Strong love can burn in the heart, yet the spirit flag and the body rebel. To remember then that one is not just an individual but a member of an Institute, a corporate body in the life of the Church, is as invigorating as the wind that blows away the dank fog. The strength of all the members flows through the veins of each.

Spiritual contact with the Centre is vitally important, but we are soul and body, and a human being needs human contact too. The life of a consecrated person in the world must be to a great extent one of inner solitude. She will feel at times loneliness and 'set-apartness' even while entering whole-heartedly into the ordinary life of those with whom she works. Nor has she any special status: a nun has dignity in her holy habit, and deference is normally shown her; a married woman has her own status; but a woman in the world consecrated to God has not and never will have outwardly any claim to special consideration. By the very force of her own integrity, dynamic in her love of God and neighbour, a member of a Secular Institute must be valued. The sense of separateness is part of the sacrifice inherent in any apostolic vocation. It is all the more important therefore that strong bonds of fraternal love and interest should unite all members amongst themselves and to their Centre, as to their home where they may bring their friends, sure of warmth and hospitality. Visitors to Centres of Secular Institutes should feel the peace, unity and simple friendliness of a truly Christian home.

Government

Secular Institutes are officially recognized by the Church. They can be erected only by the bishop of the diocese after consultation with Rome. For the first ten years after giving his approval, the bishop is free to dispense from the regulations of the age of membership, of the time of probation, of the years of consecration, and such like prescriptions, when it is a question of offices, duties, degrees, and other legal matters.

The internal government of Secular Institutes can be hierarchic provided the Sacred Congregation of Religious judge it to be conformable to the specific character and purpose of those Institutes. Other Institutes prefer a government of a confederative type, where groups are united by the same spirit: but are each self-governing. For Institutes hoping to be not only diocesan but international, the hierarchic type of government seems to be more favoured.

Where Institutes are spiritually affiliated to some religious order, they must guard against being over-dependent on their ways and customs. They must be autonomous in government, and while they draw on the spiritual heritage of these orders, such as the Dominican, Franciscan, Benedictine and Carmelite, they must beware of losing the suppleness and spontaneity so essential to their mission of penetrating the world by the methods of the world.

Once the Institute has received diocesan approval, members are not obliged to ask permission from the bishop to practise their apostolate in another diocese, where they live their professional life. If they live in a group and exercise an individual apostolate, they require no permission. But if it is a question of some corporate organization, some apostolic work done in common, then the bishop's permission must be sought, since all the apostolate of Secular Institutes comes directly under the vigilance of the bishop.

The only exception, of course, is when an Institute has received pontifical approval and becomes directly dependent on the Holy See. This grants it an exemption from diocesan authority in what concerns the internal life and government of the Institute. Its constitutions cannot be modified by diocesan authority nor can a bishop dispense the members from observing these constitutions.

Are Secular Institutes Secret?

Should members of Secular Institutes maintain strict secrecy on

their apostolic mission in the world? It is true that some Institutes believe this essential to a fruitful apostolate and in some countries and under certain conditions it might be imperative to maintain secrecy. Normally, however, a Secular Institute should avoid so much secrecy that it becomes almost a secret society, arousing suspicion and distrust. The status of members of the Church is something public, and the Church has publicly recognized Secular Institutes. The nature of their apostolate in the world does, however, require discretion, for often its success depends on its unostentatious character. Yet though an apostle may wish to remain unknown among his friends, sooner or later his outlook, words and actions will reveal him as someone different. That this should be so should not upset a member of a Secular Institute. It is then that he should guard against all dissimulation and secrecy. It is not necessary to blazon to the world one's engagement with God, but neither should excessive measures of secrecy be adopted to conceal it. Apostolic discretion is the *via media*.

Vocation

It will be seen that a special vocation is necessary for a Secular Institute. It is to be deplored that in this country, as yet, this fact seems to be greatly ignored. Talks and articles on vocations seldom include Secular Institutes. There are some, indeed, who appear to believe that one who is not good enough for a religious congregation might do for a Secular Institute. The question has been asked of members of Secular Institutes, 'Why don't you become proper nuns?' This reveals a lamentably mistaken idea of the quality of a vocation to a Secular Institute. It cannot be over-emphasized that Secular Institutes are not substitutes for religious life. They do demand a special orientation of mind and special call from God just like any religious order. Certain fundamental qualities seem essential to a vocation to any Secular Institute—such as generosity, sound common sense, maturity or at least poise of judgment, initiative and ability to accept responsibilities. Girls who could fit into a religious community might be quite unsuited for this vocation in the world, for they must learn to be, as it were, the abbesses of their own souls, not depending on the immediate supports of conventual life. Furthermore there must be evident a desire to live among the faithful, to be fully incorporated into the Christian community so as to fulfil the injunction

of the late Pope to be the leaven in the lump, the salt of the earth.

There are throughout the world many varieties of Secular Institutes fully established and approved. Of English foundations, none as yet has received pontifical approbation. (England appears to be about thirty years behind the Continent in any new growth in the Church!) There are, however, several groups struggling for recognition. This depends on the success of their apostolate which in its turn depends on the generosity of souls answering the call to this new type of dedicated life. Let us hope that with an increased knowledge of the nature and ideals of Secular Institutes, will come an increase in vocations to this life 'in the world, for the world, but not of the world'.



THE SPIRITUAL LIFE: AN HISTORICAL APPROACH—IV

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Devotio Moderna and the sequel

THE term *devotio moderna* is used strictly to describe a particular school of piety in the Netherlands which looked to Gerard de Groot (†1384) as its founder: '*totius modernae devotionis origo*'; they were Augustinian Canons, with a famous centre at Windesheim near Zwolle, and many abbeys in the area. Gerard de Groot was in touch with his fellow-Augustinian John Ruysbroeck (†1361), and so with the school of the German mystics. The 'modern' Augustinian school reached its greatest and most lasting renown with the writings of Thomas à Kempis (†1471), whose *Imitation of Christ* is the supreme product of the school of the *devotio moderna*. In the early sixteenth century there was the influence of the current humanism, with for example Erasmus of Rotterdam (†1536), who himself began at Deventer with the Augustinians of de Groot, and then for a time was an Augustinian himself, and the notions of the *devotio moderna* became modified. But above all in the sixteenth century