



LETTER OF THE HOLY FATHER

to Ms. Jolanta Szpilarewicz,
President of the World Conference of Secular Institutes
on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Apostolic Constitution
Provida Mater Ecclesia

Today is the 75th anniversary of the publication of the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia*, in which my predecessor Pius XII recognized the form of witness that, especially starting from the first decades of the last century, was particularly spreading among committed lay Catholics.

A year later, on March 12, 1948, with the Motu proprio *Primo feliciter* the Pontiff himself added an important interpretative key: with respect to *Provida Mater*, that simply indicated you as "Institutes", the motu proprio added that the specific identity of your charism comes from the secularity, defined as the "*raison d'être*" of the Institutes themselves (*Primo feliciter*, 5). Full legitimacy was thus conferred on this vocational form of consecration in the century. As I was able to tell you five years ago, I continue to think that such a document was "in a certain sense revolutionary" (*Message to the participants in the Italian conference of Secular Institutes*, 23 October 2017).

Dear Sister, more than 75 years seem to have passed since *Provida Mater*, if we look at the changes that have taken place in the Church and at the developments of many ecclesial movements and communities with charisms similar to yours. Now I know that you are preparing with great commitment the next Assembly, which will be held in August and of which, God willing, I will gladly come to conclude the work. But I would like to thank you now for your service and for your testimony. I would like to invite you, especially in the coming months, to invoke the Holy Spirit in a particular way to renew in each

member of the Secular Institutes the creative and prophetic force that made such a great gift to the Church before and after the Council Vatican II.

A great challenge concerns the relationship between secularity and consecration, aspects that you are called to keep together. Because of your consecration it is indeed easy to assimilate yourselves to religious, but I would like your initial prophecy, in particular the baptismal character that characterizes the secular lay institutes, to characterize you. Be vibrant, dear members of lay Secular Institutes, by the desire to live a "holy secularity", because you are a lay institution. You are one of the most ancient charisms and the Church will always need you. But your consecration must not be confused with religious life. It is baptism that constitutes the first and most radical form of consecration.

In ancient ecclesial Greek, baptized faithful were usually called "saints". Both the Greek term *hagios* and the Latin *sanctus* refer not so much to what is "good" in itself, but to "what belongs to God". It is in this sense that Saint Paul speaks of the Christians of Corinth as *hagioi*, despite their disorders and quarrels, to indicate not some human form of perfection, but belonging to Christ. Now, with baptism we belong to him. We are founded in an everlasting communion with God and with one another. This irreversible union is the root of all holiness, and it is also the strength to separate us in turn from worldliness. Baptism is, therefore, the source of every form of consecration.

On the other hand, the vows are the seal of your commitment to the Kingdom. And it is precisely this undivided dedication to the Kingdom that allows you to reveal the original vocation of the world, its being at the service of humankind's path of sanctification. The specificity of the charism of Secular Institutes calls you to be radical and at the same time free and creative in order to welcome from the Holy Spirit the most appropriate way of living the Christian witness. You are institutions, but never institutionalize yourselves!

Secularity, your distinctive trait, indicates a precise evangelical way of being present in the Church and in the world: as a seed, as leaven. Sometimes the word "anonymous" has been used to refer to members of Secular Institutes. I prefer to say that you are hidden within realities, just like the seed in the earth and the yeast in the dough. And of a seed or yeast it cannot be said that they are anonymous. The seed is the premise of life, the yeast is an essential ingredient for the bread to be fragrant. I, therefore, invite you to deepen the meaning and manner of your presence in the world and to renew in your

consecration the beauty and desire to participate in the transfiguration of reality.

There is a new step to take. You originally chose to "come out of the sacristies" to bring Jesus into the world. Today the exit movement must be completed by a commitment to make the world present (not worldliness!) in the Church. Many existential questions arrived late on the desks of bishops and theologians. You have experienced numerous changes in advance. But your experience has not yet sufficiently enriched the Church. The movement of prophecy that challenges you today is the next step to the one that saw you born. This does not mean returning to the sacristy, but being "receptive antennas, which transmit messages". I gladly repeat it: "you are like antennae ready to grasp the groans of novelty aroused by the Holy Spirit, and you can help the ecclesial community to take this look of goodness and find new and courageous ways to reach everyone" (*Speech addressed to the Italian conference of Secular Institutes*, May 10, 2014).

In the encyclical *All Brothers* I recalled that the social and ecological degradation of today's world (see chapter I) is also a consequence of an improper way of living religiosity (see chapter II). This is what the Lord underlines through the parable of the Good Samaritan, in which he does not denounce the wickedness of brigands and the world, but a certain self-referential and closed religious mentality, disembodied and indifferent. I think of you as an antidote to this. Consecrated secularity is a prophetic sign that exhorts us to reveal the love of the Father with life rather than words, to show it daily on the roads of the world. Today is not so much the time for persuasive and convincing speeches; it is above all the time of witness because, while apologia divides, the beauty of life attracts. Be witnesses that attract!

Consecrated secularity is called to put into practice the evangelical images of leaven and salt. Be a leaven of truth, goodness and beauty, making communion ferment with the brothers and sisters who are close to you, because only with fraternity the virus of individualism can be defeated (cf. *All Brothers*, 105). And be salt that gives taste, because without flavour, desire and amazement, life remains insipid and initiatives remain sterile. It will help you to remember how familiarity and closeness have been the ways of your credibility, and how professionalism has given you "evangelical authority" in the workplace.

Dear Sister, you have received the gift of a prophecy that "anticipated" the Council Vatican II, which welcomed the richness of your experience. Saint Paul

VI said: "you are an innovative wing of the Church in the world" (*Speech addressed to the International Congress of the leaders of Secular Institutes, September 20, 1972*). I ask you today to renew this spirit of being-ahead in the Church's journey, to be sentinels who look up and forward, with the Word of God in their hearts and love for brothers and sisters in their hands. You are in the world to testify that the world is loved and blessed by God. You are consecrated for the world, which awaits your witness to access a freedom that gives joy, that nourishes hope, that prepares the future. For this. I thank you and I bless you from my heart, asking you to continue praying for me.

Rome, St John in Lateran, February 2, 2022

Francesco