

# Life of the Spirit

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## 'PRIMO FELICITER'

### MOTU PROPRIO

IN PRAISE OF SECULAR INSTITUTES AND IN CONFIRMATION THEREOF

**N**OW that the first year since the promulgation of Our Apostolic Constitution, *Provida Mater Ecclesia* (cf. A.A.S., XXXIX, n.4, p.114) has happily passed, since We have before Our eyes so great a number of souls hidden 'with Christ in God' (*Col.* 3, 3) who aspire to perfection in the world and gladly 'with generous heart and willing mind' (*2 Mac.*, 1, 3) consecrate their whole life to God in the new Secular Institutes, We cannot refrain from giving thanks to the Divine Goodness for this new militia which has increased the army of those professing the evangelical counsels in the world; and in this way the Catholic apostolate is providentially strengthened in these our times—times of trouble and sorrow—by a strong force.

The Holy Spirit, who unceasingly re-creates and renews (cf. *Ps.* 103, 30) the face of the earth, which in these days has been made desolate and unsightly by so many and such great evils, has called to (union with) Himself by a great and special grace many dear sons and daughters, whom We lovingly bless in the Lord, so that gathered together and co-ordinated in Secular Institutes they may be the ever fresh salt of an earth which has lost its savour and is shrouded in darkness—a world to which they do not belong (cf. *John.* 15, 19) and in which by divine dispensation they must nevertheless remain—a salt which, renewed by the riches of vocation, does not become savourless (cf. *Matt.* 5, 13; *Mk.* 9, 49; *Lk.* 14, 34), (that they may be) the light which shines amid the darkness of that world and is not extinguished (cf. *John* 9, 5; 1, 5; 8, 12; *Eph.* 5, 8), and a modest but efficacious leaven which, working always and everywhere and dispersed among all classes of people from the lowest to the highest, strives, by example and in every way to reach out to and permeate all and each, until it so informs the entire mass that the whole is leavened in Christ (cf. *Matt.* 13, 33; *1 Cor.* 5, 6; *Gal.* 5, 9).

In order that the large number of Institutes which, on account of the consoling outpouring of the Spirit of Jesus Christ (cf. *Rom.* 8, 9), has everywhere arisen, may be effectively directed in accordance with the provisions of the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia*, and may bear in overflowing abundance those most excellent fruits of sanctity which are hoped for (from them); and also that, organised solidly and wisely into an ordered force (cf. *Cant.* 6, 3), they may be of sufficient worth to fight the Lord's battles valiantly both in individual and common apostolic work; confirming with great joy the Apostolic Constitution now called to mind, after mature deliberation We declare, decree and establish in a *Motu Proprio*, with sure knowledge and in the plenitude of Our Apostolic power, the following:

I Societies, whether of clerics or lay people, who profess Christian perfection in the world, and which seem beyond all doubt to come within the requirements laid down in the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia*, neither ought to nor may, on whatever pretext, be left for their direction among the ordinary Associations of the faithful but must of necessity be conformed to and raised to the state and form of Secular Institutes, which adequately corresponds to their character and needs.

II In achieving this raising up of Societies of the faithful to the superior status of Secular Institutes (cf. no. I) and in the ordering, either general or even special, of all such Institutes, it must always be borne in mind that the proper and peculiar character of such Institutes, namely, that they are *secular*—and in this lies the whole reason for the existence of such Institutes—must stand out clearly in everything. Nothing of the full profession of Christian perfection, solidly based on the evangelical counsels and truly religious as to its substance, will be withdrawn, but (this) perfection is to be exercised and professed in the world; and consequently this perfection must be adapted to secular life in all such things as are lawful and not opposed to its duties and exercise.

The whole life of the members of the Secular Institutes, consecrated as it is to God by the profession of perfection, ought to be turned towards the apostolate, which, in the purity of their intention, in their inward union with God, in their deep and generous forgetfulness and abnegation of self, in their love of souls, is thus continually to be exercised in a holy manner, so that it not only shows forth the interior spirit by which it is informed but may also continually nourish and renew it. This apostolate, which embraces the whole of their life, is wont to be always so deeply and sincerely understood and loved (lit. 'felt') in these Institutes that, with the help and counsel of Divine Providence, the thirst and zeal for souls

seems not only happily to have provided the opportunity for a life of consecration, but, to a large extent, to have imposed (on it) its own essence and form, and, in a wonderful manner to have called for and created that end which is named specific or even generic. This apostolate of the Secular Institutes is to be faithfully exercised not only *in the world* but, as originating *from the world*, and consequently its profession, exercises, forms, places and other circumstances must correspond to this secular condition.

III Those prescriptions which regard the status of religious so far as canonical discipline is concerned are not suited to the Secular Institutes, nor, generally speaking, should legislation for religious be applied to them or be considered valid for them, under the provisions of the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia* (Art. II, §1). On the other hand, those prescriptions which are found in the Institutes to fit in with their character as secular provided they in no way interfere with the full *consecration* of the whole life, and conform to the Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia*—may be preserved.

IV An hierarchical interdiocesan and universal constitution after the manner of an organised body is applicable to Secular Institutes (ib., Art. IX); and such application must certainly contribute to their internal vigour, to a wider and more efficacious influence and firmness. Yet in this ordering, which is to be suited to each particular Institute, the nature of the end which the Institute is pursuing must be taken into consideration, as must also its purpose of greater or less expansion, its degree of evolution and maturity, the collateral circumstances in which it is engaged and other things of this kind. Neither are those forms of Institute to be rejected or despised which are fused in a confederation and wish to retain and promote with moderation the local character of a particular nation, region or diocese, so long as it is one which is good and informed with a sense of the catholicity of the Church.

V Secular Institutes, even if their members live in the world, by reason of the full consecration to God and to souls which they profess, with the Church's approval, and by reason of their internal hierarchic, interdiocesan and universal ordering which they have legitimately acquired in varying degrees, are by right and deservedly counted among those states of perfection officially ordained and recognised by the Church herself in the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia*. The Institutes have therefore deliberately been assigned and committed to the competence and care of that Sacred Congregation which is entrusted with the care and ruling of 'public states of perfection'. Hence without prejudice to the rights of the Sacred Congregation of the Council concerning ordinary.

pious sodalities and unions of the faithful (c. 250 §2) and of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda concerning societies of priests and seminaries for the foreign missions (c. 252, § 3), rights established by the tenour of Canon Law and the express prescriptions of the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia*, all societies everywhere—even though they have received diocesan or even pontifical approbation—wherever they are found to have the proper elements and requisites of a Secular Institute, shall necessarily be at once converted to this new form, according to the provisions laid down above (cf. no. 1) and, in order that unity of direction may be preserved, We have decreed that they are rightly to depend upon and be assigned to the Sacred Congregation of Religious alone, within which a special office for Secular Institutes has been set up.

VI We commend indeed, from Our fatherly affection, to directors and assistants of Catholic Action and other Associations of the faithful, in whose motherly embrace so many chosen young men and women, who by a heavenly vocation are called to follow higher things, whether this be in the Religious Orders or Societies of common life or even in the Secular Institutes—are at the same time educated for a life which is fully Christian and initiated into the exercise of the apostolate, that they generously promote holy vocations of this kind; and that they lend a helping hand, not only to Religious Orders and Societies, but also to these truly providential Secular Institutes, and gladly make use of their help, while of course preserving their internal discipline.

By Our authority we entrust the faithful carrying out of these matters which we have set down in the *Motu Proprio* to the Sacred Congregation of Religious and other Sacred Congregations named above, to the Ordinaries of the places and Directors of the Societies in question—in so far as they pertain to each.

Now that which We have established by these Letters, given in a *Motu Proprio*, We order to be valid and binding for ever, all things to the contrary notwithstanding.

Given at Rome at St Peter's, on the 12th day of March, in the year one thousand, nine hundred and fortyeight, the beginning of the tenth year of Our Pontificate,

PIUS XII POPE  
*Translated by K.P.*