



“PERFECTAE CARITATIS AND VOLUNTAS DEI”

Formation Theme (2013-2014): GUIDED BY THE VISION AND MISSION
OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL
(John O’Neill, May 2014)

Opening Prayer

All glorious and life giving Trinity, as we gather for our Team meeting, open our hearts to the beautiful truths expressed during the Second Vatican Council about our secular, consecrated way of life. Enable us to live out the radical demands of this holy vocation in the midst of secular realities. May we be, in the words of Pope Paul VI a “leaven” within the world of family, work, politics and professions. May the witness of our lives be an instrument of reconciliation and brotherhood lived in the presence of God, without criticism or complaint.

Reflection:

When the Second Vatican Council issued its “Decree on the Renewal of Religious Life” (“Perfectae Caritatis”) on Oct 28, 1965, there was not a great deal attention given to Secular Institutes. Obviously, the great majority of people in “vowed Life” were, and still are, members of Religious communities. Yet, the incorporation of secular institutes in the document provided greater recognition of secular institutes as legitimate expressions of “consecrated life.”

Essentially there are two basic expressions of “consecrated life.” Religious and men and women, lay and ordained, who profess the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience and live in community, and members of Secular Institutes. Like Religious Institutes, members of secular institutes profess the evangelical counsels by vow or “by a similar bond” having the effect of the vows [Missionaries of the Kingship of Christ, for example, vow chastity and promise poverty and obedience]. Unlike members of Religious Institutes, professed members of Secular Institutes, while truly in an authentic expressions of “consecrated life,” remain “seculars.” They do not change their canonical status. Members of institutes for women, for example, don’t become Sisters. Priest members of secular institutes are members of the secular clergy, they are not Religious, even though they are in an institute of consecrated life.

There are also individuals who are consecrated virgins who live on their own, and also members of what are called “societies of apostolic life” like the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers who don’t take vows but have a form of community life. Yet, the basic distinction within “consecrated life” is that of Religious who share a common life and Consecrated Seculars who don’t live in community.



Turning directly to “Perfectae Caritatis,” the Vatican II document on “consecrated life,” there are two statements that refer specifically to secular institutes.. They read as follow:

1. *Secular Institutes are not religious communities but they carry with them in the world the profession of the evangelical counsels which is genuine and complete, and recognized as such by the Church. This profession confers a consecration on men and women, laity and clergy, who reside in the world. For this reason they should strive for total self-dedication to God, one inspired by perfect charity. These Institutes should preserve their proper and particular character, a secular one, so that they everywhere measure up successfully to that apostolate which they were designed to exercise, and which is both in the world and, in a sense, of the world.*
2. *Yet, they should surely realize that they cannot acquit themselves of so immense a task unless their members are skillfully trained in matters both human and divine, and can thus be a genuine leaven in the world for the strengthening and enlarging the body of Christ. Therefore directors should give especially serious care for the spiritual training of members and to the promotion of more advanced formation as well.*

These two brief statements could not be more packed with both affirmation and challenge. In terms of affirmation, this document of Vatican II could not possibly make any clearer that the vocation, and indeed it is a vocation, is no second class call to consecrated life. It’s commitment to the evangelical counsels is “total and complete.” There is no place for any expression of “tokenism” here. It calls for the complete “self-gift” to God through poverty, chastity and obedience.

For lay members in the strict sense in our Voluntas Dei Secular Institute (these would be our vowed lay men), they give their lives totally to God by celibate chastity, by a poverty which recognizes that they are not the masters of their possession even if they retain ownership, and an obedience to the Constitutions and to the legitimate leaders of the Institute which includes and availability to the needs of the Institute. Further by their lay consecration, they are to see their professional or other form of work as a means of extending the apostolate.

For the clerical members, one could ask what the vows would add to their priestly (or even in some cases their diaconal) vocation. The requirement that one be vowed and be in stability before they can be ordained (the normal route worldwide), sees the commitment to the counsels as something distinct from promises of celibacy and obedience made during ordination rites. Even in the case of men already ordained transferring in the Institute (as is common in the United States), full entrance into the Institute is something distinct from ordination.



The assumption of “Perfectae Caritatis” is that there is a deepening of obligations assumed by ordination. This in no way implies secular Institute members are somehow “better,” any more than Religious priests are somehow “better.” But there is free taking on of further obligations than those imposed by ordination alone.

This means that belonging to an institute of consecrated life, either as a Religious or as a member of a Secular Institute, “demands more.” The explanation of this lies in the phrase, “total self-dedication.”

By our poverty, while retaining ownership of personal property, we give oversight of our possessions by the superiors of the Institute. While retaining what we need to care for our needs, we are to provide generously for the needs of the Institute and to our personal project of poverty. By obedience, the pivotal vow for Voluntas Dei, our total dedication means avoiding anything resembling “voluntas mei,” the doing of my will. We are called to giving the superiors of the Institute oversight and even the right to reject whatever ministries we might engage in. We are not private contractors. All our ministries must serve the Church and be under supervision of the local Church and the leaders of the Institute. Further, our vow obliges us to an even a greater obedience to both the local Church where we are and to those in charge of the Institute. Our chastity not only calls to celibate living, but to a radical availability to God’s people. Further, the vow of chastity demands of us that “perfection of love” which seeks God above all else by a life of deep prayer as well as service to the people of God.

Voluntas Dei is blessed to have within its family associate members who are married and even more recently affiliate members. While the associate members do not take vows as that would conflict with their married state, they do promise to love the spirit of the evangelical counsels and to fully share in the spirituality of the Institute. The presence of Associate members in the married state and of affiliates who are both married and single assure that we are an Institute of clerical and lay members, both fully sharing “team” life living out the spirituality of the “three fives.”

“Perfectae Caritatis” clearly reminds that the sphere of our mission and ministry is the secular sphere. The “arena” of our lives is in the midst of secular realities, not only because of our living situation but by the very thrust of our secular consecration. We begin in the secular sphere. We do not start out in a Religious community and then serve from there. We are, and have always been, in the midst of the “world” with all the implications of that. .

That calls for a totally different mindset from those who come from Religious life and choose to join us. Perhaps that is the greatest “conversion” called for with such individuals. No doubt they are practicing poverty, chastity and obedience, but they have been doing so in the context of Religious life.



Secular consecration is not less than that of Religious life, it is different. It demands a great deal of maturity to live these vows without the constant supervision of a superior. Further, it takes a great deal of honesty to determine how to live a vow of poverty that class for great generosity while financially taking care of oneself. It is demanding to live the full implications of chastity without any community to return to in the evening. It demands the total giving of myself to anyone who needs me and yet, respecting the boundaries called for by celibate chastity. It calls for an obedience lived out in a secular manner by which the will of God is revealed by the very secular obligations of my life. All of this must be flow out of a lifestyle that is rooted in both the Gospel and the normal concerns of secular living. Nothing that is a legitimate expression of secular living is alien to a consecrated secular.

Of course, priest members are bound by the obligations of canon law to refrain from engaging in occupations that conflict with the clerical state, such as seeking political office. But such professions are very appropriate for lay members of the Institute.

As “*Perfectae Caritatis*” reminds, all of this demands exceptional formation, “human and divine.” This, of course, means that the most critical aspect of our Institute is the work of constant and firm conversion through prayer, study and reflection. All members should have a solid training in theological and spiritual matters. Of course some of this depends on one’s ministry, lay or ordained. Yet, there is no one, no matter how educated, that can say that their theological and spiritual formation is complete.

However, “*Perfectae Caritatis*” calls for ongoing training and formations in matters secular. Our life is not to one that is of a recluse or monastic. We are to be actively engaged in the world. While priest members of secular institutes are not called to be primarily involved in secular occupations, they are called to know and be familiar and be present within the secular sphere. Lay members are to fully engage is the world of politics, employment, professions and labor. They must be attuned to the world about them and to seek opportunities to transform them by the Gospel. Further, as the Constitutions of *Voluntas* state, lay members are to continually develop their professional skills.

“*Perfectae Caritatis*” reminds Directors of their obligation to offer opportunities to develop their knowledge and spiritual maturity. This would certainly include study of the social teaching of the Church. Today, the writings of Pope Francis as well as the encyclicals of the recent Popes are all a must. Reading of journals that examine the role of the Church in the “public square” would be strongly suggested.



Discussion Questions:

- 1 *What did you learn about secular institutes that you had not thought about before?*
- 2 *How would you explain the distinction between Religious Life and Secular Institutes?*
- 3 *What ideals does “Perfectae Caritatis” urge members to live out but their vocation?*
- 4 *How is “vowed life” lived out in a “secular” manner?*
- 5 *How can our consecration deepen our priestly/diaconal vocation for those who are ordained?*
- 6 *Why is our vocation “no Less” than that of vowed Religious life?*
- 7 *How does the presence of married associate members and married and single affiliates contribute to our way of life?*
- 8 *How can married and affiliate members benefit from being members of our family?*

Concluding Prayer:

God our Father, we thank you for calling men and women to serve in your Son’s Kingdom as sisters, brothers, religious priests, consecrated virgins, and hermits, as well as members of Secular Institutes. Renew their knowledge and love of you, and send your Holy Spirit to help them respond generously and courageously to your will.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.