

**MALE LAY RELIGIOUS
AND THEIR SPECIFIC VOCATION
IN THE CHURCH**

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(Intervention in the Synod on Religious Life)

Your Holiness, Venerable Shepherds of the Church, dear brothers and sisters,

1. My intervention refers to number 32 of "Instrumentum Laboris" and I will develop my point keeping in mind specifically the more than 60,000 faithful Christians who profess religious life in its lay form. It does not directly refer to the almost one million female religious even though, obviously, their religious life has been also lay. I am dealing here with the vocation and mission of brothers as they are commonly called, a name which has a profoundly evangelical ring, whether they be members of lay Institutes or members of mixed clerical and lay Institutes.

The number that I am referring to in I.L. says that to "these" (the Brothers) "*special attention should be paid.*" I would want my intervention to contribute to this "special attention" so that it has been not lost among the synod fathers since this type of vocation is presented several times to the Church for consideration and nevertheless there does not seem to be a sufficient understanding about it nor is there an adequate answer.

2. It has been pointed out many times that the losses that we feel in the personnel of religious families in these last decades reach their maximum among lay religious men and also among religious women. This is an alarm signal filled with an uneasiness and some generalizations that require an urgent examination and an adequate response. This uneasiness is now spoken of plainly and was even alluded to in the Second Vatican Council in the amended text of "Perfectae Caritatis". The general impression of the survey undertaken by the Union of Superiors General in 1981-1982, in the studies of the General Meeting of that body in 1985 as well as in the analysis with the Dicasta for Religious with respect to the plenary session of 1986, these all indicate a continuation of this uneasiness even though some progress has been made in the treatment of this problem.

2.1 In the short time that I have been given I will point out some of the most universal recognized causes. I will begin with **ignorance and misunderstanding of the nature and identity of the lay religious life**, quite widespread in the People of God, not rare among priests, but it also exists, I would point out, among Bishops. Frequently this life-style is considered to be an incomplete Religious Life, "second

class" or reserved for those who lack the talents of resources necessary for embracing the priestly vocation. Even a holy pastor such as Bishop Arcel admits with Gospel sincerity that until he was "converted" in this respect, when he was guiding youth in choosing their vocation, "*he had not thought of suggesting to them the vocation of a brother except when it was evident that they lacked the aptitudes for the priesthood*"...False appraisal or a low opinion of one form of consecrated life is certainly not the way to encourage someone to embrace it. There are many ways in which a poorly directed vocational ministry program can confuse the religious vocation concept itself when zeal for taking care of immediate needs becomes clearer than thanksgiving to God for the rich "variety of gifts" (P.C. 1) with which to enrich his Church.

2.2 JOHN PAUL II said in his closing speech to the plenary session of CIVCSVA that in 1986 he studied "**the identity and mission of the brothers in lay and clerical Institutes**" and that "*lay religious life in the Church, as an expression of total consecration for the Kingdom, is an expression of the sanctity of the Bride of Christ and contributes in an efficient and original way to the mission of the Church in evangelization and in multiple ministries and apostolates. One cannot think of a religious vocation in the Church without this particular lay vocation*". The same Holy Father then recalled how "*religious life was born out of a typically lay model*". Great charismatic leaders and founders of important religious families - Benito de Nursia, Francis of Assisi, John of God - along with the Patriarch of several lay religious families, John Baptist de La Salle, in no way did these consider the priestly character as necessary for the integral consecration to God that the religious life offers. In some Institutes the lay character is at the very heart of the foundational charism itself. For lay consecrated men as well as for other religious and for the almost one million women religious who profess religious life in its lay form, the beautiful words of the Pope apply (Angelus of September 24) that those consecrated are "*privileged witnesses of the completeness of God*".

2.3 The consecration of lay religious constitutes in itself a complete exercise in the universal priesthood in terms of all baptized and confirmed persons: this serves to demonstrate in an original way the theological value of the laity, which for a long time and for so many was not duly appreciated. The essential act of the priesthood consists in making the spiritual sacrifice in which the Christian offers him/her self to God "*as a living, holy and pleasing sacrifice to God in authentic worship*" (Romans 12:1). The Brother's religious consecration also offers the favorable means of a generous and permanent offering of himself to God. It is useful for the Church that, within the extremely rich variety of religious vocations, those of the laity clearly demonstrate the significance and wealth of the universal priesthood of the faithful (cf. Lumen Gentium 10).

3. For centuries, assistant brothers of one type or another, dedicated exclusively to domestic and manual labors, have permitted priestly religious to be totally devoted to apostolic activities. The resulting internal organization in monasteries reflected social structures which happily today no longer exist. Direct participation in the apostolate was not planned for these brothers and, as a consequence, their formation was extremely limited. Their spirituality typically included sentiments of renunciation and humility which would pre-

pare them to accept an inferior human condition and a clear limitation of certain rights rather than an apostolic and social commitment which should characterize all religious life.

3.1 We know that contemporary thinking is highly sensitized to the values of equality and that full participation demands an equal distribution of formation facilities for all as a corollary of the respect demanded for fundamental human rights.

It is not acceptable to deny "a priori" a human group the means to develop God-given talents without empowering them to play a worthwhile role for the good of all. It is these values which, correctly understood, are in perfect accord with the Gospel. Here also the religious life should always be looking for a real inculturation that is made available and is intelligible to mankind in each historic period. The model of genuine fraternity which, with a strong cultivation of community values, is an essential witness of religious life and should be made clearly evident in the structures that regulate it so that it is clearly perceptible. But it is sometimes the case that certain distinctions and categories which are due to historical factors are basically peripheral and not exactly evangelical and are disconcerting to those who are examining religious life in order to better understand it or even to embrace it and these distinctions and categories are difficult for those who live it. With regard to fraternity as well as with justice, it can be said that it should be proclaimed openly in the Church and should be clearly evident.

With regard to this, it is still strongly felt and constantly in demand, for example in the very special occasions that I have already cited and testimonies heard recently about which the International Congress of Superiors General proposed a year ago as a corollary of its reflections on religious life: "*We think that the equality of and the sharing of responsibility by all members of our community should be promoted according to each one's charism. We see from this perspective a necessary revision of Canon Law insofar as it pertains to Institutes composed of clerics and non-clerics. The responsibilities of internal government for these Institutes should be also accessible to non-clerics*" (Final Document, II, 2.1d).

4. In a more global sense and now I am referring to different types of lay religious, it is urgent that these religious become not just spectators, but that they openly participate in the various organizations and councils that study and decide about pastoral plans as well as the nature and proposals about community and religious life. Their direct and real participation in such instances not only will be a proof of that "*great esteem for the lay religious life*", proclaimed by the same Council (P.C. 10), for "*the great need that the Church has for pastoral activity in youth education, in helping the sick and in other services*", but also it will be a stimulus and a guarantee of the ecclesiality and ministerial character of these very respected services.

4.1 This "lay ministry" character cited twice by John Paul II in his speech to the Plenary session in January, 1986, which also had been alluded to by Paul VI in "Evangelii Nuntiandi" (69, 75) was for the Founders at the very heart of their charismatic spirit. The theologian Jean Regal admires in Saint John Baptist de La Salle the twenty-two times (there are, in fact, more) he uses the expression "ministry" or "holy

ministry" when referring to the educational service that he expected of his disciples. A vision of work as a service of the Church to which they consecrate their lives: the expression and at the same time the playing the role of redeeming love to those in need, closely associated with the educational finality in the mission given by Jesus to his Church. This is a professional work, which, responsibly carried out, signifies and carries with it the sincere appreciation of the Church for human work along with its valid and generous contribution to the progress of science and technical skills for the good of all creation in perfect accord with the design of the Creator. This is a work illuminated and animated by a faith vision and a sense of church that discovers true meaning in the response to a religious vocation.

4.2 "*It is desirable*" - says I.L. - "*that lay brothers be given an integrated formation: human, theological, pastoral and professional*". In this statement first and foremost there is an expressed urgency to once and for all root out the neglect in the formation of lay brothers in clerical congregations. Remember that for all lay religious, and not only for male lay religious, formation is an indispensable condition so that the members can properly respond to their vocation. For everyone, a **professional formation**, a total formation that enables them to fully express the profound respect for and interest in the Church by means of technical progress and a faithful insistence on using all means for dignifying mankind and improving life's conditions. In terms of a **theological formation**, thanks be to God that this is not something exclusively reserved for the priesthood. This is especially important for those who normally dedicate themselves to activities or services that in themselves demand their complete attention to problems and realities of the temporal order and sometimes may occasion the forgetting of their transcendent value. Sometimes these services are mistakenly called "profane" but these services were understood and taught by the Founders as being a priority of their ministry.

5. Finally, I would say that the lay brothers' vocation constitutes a special practical and spiritual proximity with the immense multitude of "lay Christians", seculars also called to a new type of world evangelization joined in a particular way of sharing with the religious an animation and profound integration like so many of the non-ordained faithful. The lay religious, being fully religious, does not cease being lay, even though his life-style is different than that of seculars.

This animation and integration will continue to permit his being attentive to youth who are as rich in problems as in hopes, as well as to the sick, seeing in them the privileged face of the Redeemer and with a sincere priority for the promotion of the poor, just as their Founders did. These are the eternal demands of his vocation which, in our own time, stimulate and promote the total surrender of the lay brother with complete and reciprocal participation with his brothers, the religious clerics, as all together follow the unique mission of Christ as we all participate together moved by one and the same Spirit: "*Divisiones vero gratiarum sunt - says the Apostle - (1 Corinthians 12: 4-7) - idem autem Spiritus; et divisiones ministracionum sunt, idem autem Dominus; et divisiones operationum sunt, idem vero Deus, que operatur omnia in omnibus. Unicuique autem datur manifestatio Spiritus utilitatem.*" ●