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Letter of the Holy Father Francis to the President of the World Conference of Secular Institutes, on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia*

The following is the letter sent by the Holy Father Francis 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*:

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

A year later, on 12 March 1948, with the Motu proprio *Primo Feliciter*, the same Pontiff added an important interpretative key: with respect to *Provida Mater*, which indicated you simply as “Institutes”, the motu proprio added that the specific identity of your charism comes from your secular nature, defined as the “raison d’être” of the Institutes themselves (see *Primo Feliciter*, 5). This gave full legitimacy to this vocational form of secular consecration. As I had the opportunity to tell you five years ago, I still think that document was “in a certain sense revolutionary” (*Message to participants at the Italian Conference of Secular Institutes*, 23 October 2017).

Dear Sister, it seems that more than 75 years have passed since *Provida Mater*, if we look at the changes that have taken place in the Church and the developments of so many ecclesial movements and communities with

charisms similar to yours. Now I know that you fully engaged in preparing the next Assembly, which will be held in August and whose work, God willing, I will gladly come to conclude. But now I would like to thank you for your service and for your witness. I would like to invite you, especially in the coming months, to invoke in a special way the Holy Spirit so that he may renew in each member of secular institutes the creative and prophetic power that made them such a great gift to the Church before and after the Second Vatican Council.

A great challenge concerns the relationship between secularity and consecration, aspects which you are called to hold together. Indeed, because of your consecration it is easy to assimilate you to religious, but I would like your initial prophecy, particularly the baptismal character which marks secular lay institutes, to characterize you. Be inspired, dear members of secular institutes, by the desire to live a “holy secularity”, because you are a lay institution. You are one of the oldest 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, it was customary to call the baptized faithful “saints”. Both the Greek term *hagios* and the Latin term *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 turmoil and strife, to indicate not some human form of perfection, but their belonging to Christ. Now, through baptism we belong to Him. We are grounded in an everlasting communion with God and with each other. This irreversible union is the root of all holiness, and it is also the power that can separate us, in turn, from worldliness. Baptism is therefore the source of every form of consecration.

On the other hand, your vows are the seal of your commitment to the Kingdom. It is precisely this undivided dedication to the Kingdom that allows you to reveal the original vocation of the world, your being in service to the path of the sanctification of humanity. The specific nature of the charism of the Secular Institutes requires that you are radical and at the same time free and creative, so as to receive from the Holy Spirit the most opportune way of living your Christian witness. You are institutes, but never become institutionalized!

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

There is a new step to be taken. Originally you chose to “come out of the sacristies” to bring Jesus into the world. Today the movement of going out must be complemented by a commitment to make the world present (not worldliness!) in the Church. Many existential questions have arrived late on the desks of bishops and theologians. You have experienced many changes in advance. But your experience has not yet enriched the Church sufficiently. The movement of prophecy that challenges you today is the next step after your birth. This does not mean returning to the sacristy, but being “receptive antennas, transmitting messages”. I gladly repeat: “you are like antennas ready to receive the smallest innovations prompted by the Holy Spirit, and you can help the ecclesial community to take on this gaze of goodness and find new and bold ways to reach all peoples” (*Address to the Italian Conference of Secular Institutes*, 10 May 2014).

In the Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, I recalled that the social and ecological degradation towards which today’s world is heading (cf. Chapter 1) is also a consequence of an improper way of living out religiosity (cf. Chapter 2). It is what the Lord emphasizes through the parable of the good Samaritan, in which he does not denounce the wickedness of the robbers and of the world, but rather 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 urges us to *reveal the Father’s love with our lives rather than with words*, to show it daily on the roads of the world. Today is not so much the time for persuasive and convincing discourses; it is above all the time for witnessing because, while apologia is divisive, the beauty of life attracts. Be witnesses who attract!

Consecrated secularity is called to put into practice the Gospel images of leaven and salt. Be a leaven of truth, goodness and beauty, fermenting communion with the brothers and sisters around you, because only through fraternity can the virus of individualism be defeated (cf. *Fratelli Tutti*, 105). And be salt that gives flavour, because without flavour, desire and wonder, life remains insipid and initiatives remain sterile. It will help you to remember how proximity and closeness have been the ways of your credibility, and how professionalism has given you “evangelical authority” in working environments.

Dear Sister, you have received the gift of a prophecy that “anticipated” the Second Vatican Council, which welcomed the richness of your experience. Saint Paul VI said: “you are an advanced wing of the Church in the world” (*Address to the International Congress of Leaders of Secular Institutes*, 20 September 1972). I ask you today to renew this spirit of anticipation of the Church’s journey, to be sentinels looking upwards and forwards, with the Word of God in your hearts and love for your brothers and sisters in your hands. You are in the world to testify that it is loved and blessed by God. You are consecrated for the world, which awaits your witness to 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 to pray for me.

Rome, Saint John Lateran, 2 February 2022

FRANCIS
