

FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENTS OF THE SECULAR FRATERNITIES¹

In order to have a clearer idea of the nature of the secular fraternities and the position they occupy in the Church, it is necessary to always have in mind some basic points that can synthesize the fundamental elements and characteristics which are common to all of them. In the formulation of these points the charismatic dimension of the secular fraternities, their role in the life and history of the Church, their present reality and hopes of renewal asked by the II Vatican Council have always been taken into consideration.

In the concrete, these fundamental elements are the following:

1. The vocation to live the evangelical life and the spirit of the Beatitudes, according to the charism proper to a religious family, can be done in different states of life: religious, priestly and laical.²

2. The mission and commitment of the laity in the Church and in the world are derived from their baptismal consecration.³ But many lay people have experienced that the participation in the charism of a religious family is for them a source of energy to live those demands and, at the same time, a school of life that prepares them to be an evangelical leaven in the world.⁴

3. Actual experience shows that the vital communion or reciprocity among religious, diocesan clerics and laity, called to live the charism of the same founder, helps one and all to better accomplish their mission in the world and in the Church.

4. Living a common charism brings about and develops a profound sense of evangelical brotherhood among the members of a religious family and the rest of human beings.

5. The desire to live this charism in the Church is practiced by adhering to a *Rule* approved by competent ecclesiastical authority and is shown before an ecclesiastical

community by means of a public commitment, which renews and strengthens the baptismal promises.

6. The secular fraternities have always had, since their origins, the support of the Church, and from her they received the timely canonical ratification. Today, with updated structures, the secular fraternities have come into line with the II Vatican Council that has granted the lay associations their right to have their own organization.
5

As we will see when we look deeper into these points in the next pages, the secular fraternity must be seen as a true vocation to live the evangelical life according to the charism of the religious family to which they belong, and in communion with the entire family.

To belong to a secular fraternity is an authentic vocation and, as such, demands a response: a response to live a life that allows the deepening and growth of baptismal vocation and consecration; to stress the prophetic character of the charism proper to the religious family and to be, in this way, evangelical ferment in the world, living according to the spirit of the Beatitudes.

Evangelical Life

The call to live the evangelical life and the spirit of the Beatitudes according to the charism proper to a religious family is a vocation to which religious, diocesan clerics and laity can be called. Each one of them will respond to this call according to his or her proper condition and state of life. Moreover, this vocation should be understood within the context of the universal call to holiness.⁶

“Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (*Mt 5:48*), are words of Jesus directed to all Christians and not only to a concrete class, and demands the imitation of Christ Jesus, the perfect image of the Father and our true Brother.⁷ Grace transforms every Christian in such a way that he or she becomes the image of the Son of God, Jesus.⁸

From the reading of these texts it is evident that the imitation of Christ cannot be reduced to the sphere of divine exemplarity, but embraces the entire vast and profound reality of following Christ. The “come and follow me” is a call that is directed to all Christians, and all must respond to this invitation, according to his or her personal calling. Every Christian life that is authentic is a true evangelical life.

Applying these reflections to the secular fraternities we have to say, with all fairness, that the life of their members is a response to the vocation to live the Gospel as

a paschal mystery and that the secular fraternity itself is a fitting way of living that call and that response in the world, participating, in a secular manner, in the charism of a religious family.⁹

So that their life may be truly evangelical, the members of a secular fraternity must:

1. Tend to holiness, following, in their own way, the evangelical path of the religious family to which they belong.
2. To live in a stable form and eminent manner the *evangelical* life, remaining in his or her own secular condition and striving to put into practice whatever the II Vatican Council has taught about the laity.

Some orientations

How can a member of a secular fraternity live the evangelical life in the world?

In the documents of the II Vatican Council we can encounter a whole series of indications and orientations. The principal texts to which the following paragraphs refer are: **LG** 30 – 42; **AA** 4 – 7; **GS** 72; **CD** 17; **AG** 15 – 21. The answer to the proposed question comes out spontaneously from them. Here are some of the points that compose it:

1. To intimately live with Christ in God,¹⁰ making use of the means that are conducive to this purpose (for example, the participation in the liturgy, personal prayer).
2. To be a faithful member of the people of God and of the community without antinomy, ambiguity, or dualism.
3. To give testimony of Christ in deeds and words in the family, in the social ambience in which one lives, in the exercise of one's profession.
4. To be a leaven in the world; for which it is necessary:

To know one's culture; to improve and foster it, in harmony with the new circumstances, and bring it to its perfection in Christ.

To respond to the needs and demands of the persons of today, having in mind not only their spiritual and moral, but also social and economic needs.

To take active part either as individual or as community, in the economic progress by promoting justice. This demands professional competence, effective participation in the solution of problems of the society through concrete effort.

To live the Christian charity and friendship.

5. To collaborate more closely with the hierarchy, by accomplishing special tasks intended for the proclamation of the Gospels and the diffusion of Christian doctrine. There are many situations that are accessible only to the laity; there are activities in the field of evangelization that are more proper for the laity.

6. To faithfully assimilate the spirituality or charism of the religious family to which they belong in order to live and incarnate it in their secular way of life and in their obligations mentioned above.

The member of the secular fraternity will encounter inspiration and strength to live this plan of life in Mary, faithful collaborator of her Son and perfect model of holiness and human solidarity.¹¹

PARTICIPATION IN THE CHARISM OF A RELIGIOUS FAMILY

In the life of the Church there are charisms which, in their diversity, do not only characterize the different religious institutes, but in addition, are also inspirers of different paths toward holiness within the world of the laity.

The calling, the vocation to live a common charism in different situations and states of life is a fact; it is likewise a fact that all those who respond to this calling invoke as model and master one and the same father.

In this context we can talk about merger of a specific charism of a religious institute and the secular character proper to the laity. This merger happens when the religious charism fulfills with vigor and fidelity its prophetic role, putting forward the rich variety of its gifts, and encounters resonance and adequate rendition in the secular world, where the Holy Spirit stirs up concrete spiritual desires which, in turn, yearn and expect inspiration and stimulus.

The secular fraternity is a spiritual mediation of the prophetic charism at the service of the people of God and of the charism of the religious institute to which it is united. This spiritual mediation creates between the religious institute and the secular fraternity a true communion and a full apostolic integration, in continual, inspiring and mutual spiritual assistance. They are not only simple relationships of sympathy; they are relationships that express the participation of the secular fraternity in the religious charism, the charismatic complementarity and the vital reciprocity between the institute and secular fraternity.

Experience of Life

Living the faith today is difficult for every Christian; the fact of being in the world obliges a Christian to confront realities that are foreign and even hostile to the Gospel and man. A Christian feels like being attacked and experiences the need for support, for the support of any kind of the community that may be – as a sign of the Church of which he or she is a part – as a place where faith may be joyfully professed, and where one can, together with other human beings, offer prayer and praise to God; a community in which one can find inspiration to live in charity and right direction for spiritual life and for action itself.

The secular fraternity puts its members in contact with the spirituality, transformed into life and experience, of a religious institute. This contact should be translated into a process of spiritual formation or maturity; it should be for them a source of nutritious food. In fact, the more they go deeper into spirituality, the stronger they feel in their faith and committed to incarnate their entire spiritual plan in their own temporal or secular reality, avoiding, nonetheless, falling into the danger of clericalism or monachism.

In a word, the participation in the riches of the spirituality of a religious family will help the member of a secular fraternity take the leaven of the charism of the religious institute and introduce it as ferment in the laical dough.

Fraternal Communion

As experience lived in the different secular fraternities shows, a profound and living intercommunication among the religious and members of the secular fraternity spontaneously comes from an authentic participation in the charism of a religious institute, which is of great spiritual and apostolic advantage and of great help to the fulfillment of the mission that all the members have in the world and in the Church. In this communion the charismatic complementarity about which we have talked before becomes a reality.

The participation in the charism helps in discovering the communitarian aspects proper to the life of the member of the secular fraternity, either in the perimeter of the fraternity itself, or in that of the whole religious family. .

This discovery is in itself already a powerful stimulus to live the communion in depth, and this experience of communion is, in turn, for the secular members, a motive and means to grow in faith and to participate in concrete initiatives, both as individual and members of a community. The religious on his part discovers communion as a help and stimulus for being more aware of his own vocation.

Love for the Church

The communion of the secular fraternity with the religious institute does not drain its possibilities within the perimeter of the religious family or in the service of specific interests of the same; the tertiary must be a consummate Catholic and witness of the Church. His or her testimony must be animated by love.

For the member of the secular fraternity, to love the Church means to work in the world as ferment, in union with the brothers and sisters with the proper pastors.¹² Something bad had happened if the participation in a religious charism did not transform the secular fraternity into living stone of the building of the Church.

SECULAR NATURE AND INSERTION INTO A TEMPORAL REALITY

A member of a secular fraternity is, and remains always, a lay, a secular, with the characteristics proper to laity in its two dimensions: *spirituality* and *mission*. As such, he or she has a well defined personality within the Church, with proper mission and spirituality. It would deform his or her personality if he or she would insist on living like a monk or cleric. Besides, by following that path, he or she would stop fulfilling the specific mission to which God calls him or her.

Being lay is for a member of a secular fraternity a title of honor and a source of responsibilities; from it are derived his/her particular rights and obligations. As laity, they are distinguished from other members of the people of God and characterized by their presence in the world, in the family, in the field of work, dedicated to various temporal activities, in the middle of society¹³ in which they have been called to live as children of God.

Secularity – not secularism – is, therefore, the proper condition of the laity who belongs to secular fraternity; and, therefore, must also be the mark that characterizes the human and Christian dimension of his/her life.

The member of a secular fraternity belongs to the Church and the world, without antinomies, dualisms and ambiguities; still more he/she must be Church in the world. In this respect two texts of the II Vatican Council are worth noting: AG 21 and GS 43. A lay, member of a fraternity, must cultivate in his/her worldly reality, his/her secular condition in its triple dimension: *priestly*, *prophetic* and *kingly*, according to the grace received at Baptism, in order to restore all things in Christ.¹⁴

Great consequences for his/her life and his/her spirituality are derived from this. The secularity lived in this way shows the sovereignty of God over all things and the riches

of the experience of the Church. However, it will be necessary to surpass the very real danger of indifferentism, of absenteeism or the lack of commitment.¹⁵

From the reflection on the conciliar texts indicated above the following conclusions about the temporal commitment of the members of the secular fraternities, in both individual and communitarian levels, are derived:

1. Their presence and insertion in the temporal realities and structures must be adapted to the following suppositions:
 - a. A realistic view of the common good: progress must be in accordance with the dignity of man/woman, the son/daughter of God.
 - b. The action must take place in one's own environment (barrio, city, country, local church) with perspectives that are open to universal community.
 - c. Insertion, according to his/her vocation, aptitudes and personal abilities, in areas such as, work, family, school, health assistance, culture, public life.
 - d. Attention to the specific charism
 - e. Collaboration with other groups and movements.
2. For a just relationship between personal commitment and the group the following aspects must always be kept in mind:
 - b. The mutual influence and enrichment through dialogue, the reciprocal moral support, the togetherness in the participation, the revision of life in the light of the Gospel.
 - c. The promotion of the responsibility of each one so that each may realize and put into effect his/her proper personal options.
 - d. The exercise of the responsibility as a group. Here themes such as, conceptualization, formation, promotion of each one in his/her mission and eventually action in common can be considered.
3. The couples who belong to the secular fraternity must reflect about their spousal relationships for their enrichment, mutual help and shared responsibility.
4. Respect for the legitimate pluralism in concrete choices or options. The members of the secular fraternities should get inspiration from the Bible, the teachings of the Church and respective Episcopal Conferences, and must be guided by criteria of evangelical justice, respect for properties and human promotion.

AUTONOMY IN COMMUNION

The Code of Canon Law regulates the relations between the secular fraternity and its respective religious institute in canon 303: The members of the secular fraternity by sharing the spirit of a religious institute, strive for Christian perfection under the higher direction – *sub moderamine* – of the same institute.

The expression *sub moderamine* indicates a relation of dependence that admits of different shades and accents when collated in the *Rules* of the different secular fraternities.

The II Vatican Council, with the purpose of promoting the laity in the womb of the Church, has explicitly recognized the right of the laity to form associations and govern them,¹⁶ and elaborate programs of actions and implement them.¹⁷ The Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*), in num. 9, recommends to the priests that “they be confident in giving lay people charge of duties in the service of the Church, giving them freedom and opportunity for activity and even inviting them, when opportunity occurs, to take the initiative in undertaking projects of their own.” All these recommendations are valid for all secular fraternities; in fact, with diversity of shades, they have been placed together in the legislative texts of many religious institutes.

Together with this promotion of the laity, a second motive in favor of autonomy (not independence) of the secular fraternities must be added: *a common charism*, and this is almost a rediscovery, can be lived in different conditions and situations by the members of the same religious family, that is, by the male religious, female religious, diocesan clergy and laity.

Inseparably linked to this fact is the discovery that this diversity enriches the entire religious family and helps to fulfill better its mission in the Church.

The secular fraternity, as an integral part of a religious family, lives the spiritual experience and the charism of this religious family, giving way to a vital reciprocity among its different branches: male religious, female religious and laity. This reciprocity becomes a living reality in the measure that one and all are faithful to the proposal to live the common charism in their proper state and collaborate in the realization of the common mission.

The living experience of these realities – common charism and vital reciprocity -

overpowers the concept of autonomy, that can contain the danger of separatism or independence, and leads to the assimilation of the concept and attitude of communion.

This attitude could be expressed in this manner: communion in the accomplishment of diverse services; communion in the fulfillment of the responsibilities and proper obligations of each: self-government of the secular fraternity, spiritual assistance on the part of the Order. To say it more briefly, it could be called: autonomy in communion.

The desire for independence can be an infantile or adolescent infirmity, and the passive submission implies a renunciation of the exercise of one's own responsibility. Countries where these extreme attitudes have been substituted by an authentic vital reciprocity are witnesses of a new flowering of secular movements in the perimeter of various religious families.

This autonomy in communion has given place to new situations in the life of secular fraternities. The religious of the first Order no longer is the director (the word assistant with which he is designated today is poor and does not express his mission), he is the brother who lives a common charism and who walks together with the members of the secular fraternity, sharing with them joys, sorrows and faith experiences. His condition of being a religious and representative of the first Order is not a title of power but of brotherly service.

The secular fraternities must revive the awareness of their proper nature and the responsibilities that pertain to them in the mission of the religious family of which they are members.

Communion demands respect for every one and, at the same time, the collaboration of all the members of the same religious family. The obligation to keep and promote with fidelity, both in its religious and secular dimension, the common charism and its witness in the Church requires the unity of all, in the mutual respect in the participation of responsibilities.

IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

In order to understand the relation between the members of the secular fraternities and the local church, it is necessary to reflect on both terms of the binomial and on the mystery of the Church as communion and sacrament.

The members of the secular fraternity wish and must be recognized in the Church for their vocation to live in the world, in the secular dimension, the charism of a religious family. They wish to be recognized more for what they are before God, for what they are in the life of the Church than for their apostolic activities and their being in the world. The charism, the gift that they have received from the Holy Spirit, defines their position and their specific mission in the Church.

The secular fraternities do not belong to the structure of the Church but to her holiness and life.

The members of the secular fraternities should cultivate the following attitudes;

1. Love for the Local Church.

Their own vocation requires them to love the local church. They have not received a charism only for their personal sanctification, but for the edification of the Church.

This love must be realistic and active; it must move them to know the church of the place where they live, its needs and the directions of its pastor.

2. Insertion and Communion

Their baptism and proper charism oblige them to remain vitally united to the ecclesial community and to the hierarchy. The secular fraternity must neither hinder nor disturb his insertion into the life of the Church.

In order to be fully ecclesial, the secular fraternity must be organically inserted into the people of God, its mission and communion. In the local church the members of the fraternity should strive to promote life and holiness, by living and acting according to the charism they received. Their relationships with the Bishop, teacher and pastor, must be a model of creative fidelity and sincere dialogue. The bishop, on his part, must welcome them in such a manner that, after being integrated into the diocesan community, they may remain faithful to their proper identity.

3. Apostolate

The fundamental contribution that the members of the secular fraternities must give to the building up of the ecclesial community is to live and give testimony of their proper vocation, as individuals or as a group. In fact, the secular fraternity offers a great service to the Church as a school of Christian life and of availability to work for the Kingdom.

In particular the members of the secular fraternities, formed and educated to act freely and responsibly in the ordering of the temporal realities according to God's plan, must strive to form their conscience in matters of concrete choices, always having in mind the teachings of the magisterium of the Church.

The members of the secular fraternities, in general, have always given good testimony of commitment and collaboration in the apostolic activities of the diocese. When they are involved in concrete apostolic activities – which in some cases can be convenient and in others necessary – they must prefer activities that can receive orientation and stimulus from their proper spirituality and that, at the same time, can respond better to the real needs of the local church.

4. Joint Pastoral Activity

This expression includes two concepts; and, consequently, two ways of performing pastoral activity:

- a. It is directed toward the building up of a diocesan community as a community rich in gifts and charisms, in such a way that it may truly be a sacrament of unity and light for all peoples. If joint pastoral activity is understood in this manner, from the very bosom of charism flows naturally the obligation to collaborate in it and to be present in the life of the Church and in her organisms maintaining one's unique physiognomy.
- b. It is directed toward the planning of apostolic activities, having the bishop as its central promoter and coordinator, in whom resides the fullness of pastoral duty. Keeping always the promotion of unity of the community the focus of its attention, the presence of the secular fraternity in the planning and implementation of these apostolic activities will depend on the concrete condition of the diocese.

5. Presence in the Parish

The particular communities, the groups of evangelical life, etc. cannot ignore the parish community, which is an ecclesial community of primary importance.

The presence of the secular fraternity can help the spiritual and pastoral renewal of the parish. On one hand it must be sensitive to the real situation of the parish and be well disposed to a living presence and effective collaboration and, on the other hand, that the parish community be capable of understanding and accepting groups of evangelical life. These feelings of understanding and of acceptance are the solid foundation for the collaboration between those groups and the parish and, at the same time, are a source of esteem and respect for those apostolic activities that require inter-parochial collaboration or that are done outside the territory of the parish.

The religious who assist the secular fraternities in their spiritual needs must be aware of their mission in the formation and instructions of their members. It is highly recommended that they give them personal spiritual direction, but they should always respect their freedom to choose. Let them not insist on having as proper those activities that may be an unnecessary duplication of other parochial activities. Rather, they must foster their integration into joint pastoral activities.

6. Structures

Just like any other movement of evangelical life, the secular fraternities must seek not so much their presence in the juridical and pastoral structures, as to be a prophetic sign in the ecclesiastical community

The reason for their presence in the ecclesial structures, such as pastoral counsels and other diocesan organisms, must not only be the prestige that it may give them. It must respond to and be in accordance with their very nature and their desire for communion with the local church.

7. Openness to the Universal Church

The secular fraternities can enrich the life of the particular church by sharing their universal dimension and by echoing the experiences and perspectives of other local churches.

Finally, by way of conclusion, if the members of the secular fraternities are

distinguished by their love for the Church and their availability with respect to the local church, they will be better understood and accepted, with their specific vocation, as individuals and as groups.

The Validity of the Secular Fraternities

The secular fraternities participate in the spirit of an institute; they live a dimension that cannot be separated from a religious family; that is, they are the extension and charismatic complementarity of an Order or religious institution. Therefore, far from being an obstacle to the charism of a religious Order, they strengthen and complement it.

Hence, the Church and the entire humanity have the right to ask and expect from Orders and religious institutes the establishment and the spiritual support of their secular charismatic extension. And for this reason, all religious are obliged to favor and support the establishment and spiritual development of their corresponding secular fraternity, but particularly the major and local superiors, the spiritual directors of the secular fraternities and those who are tasked with pastoral responsibility.