



A CONTRIBUTION ON THE IDENTITY AND SPECIFICITY OF THE LAITY IN OUR CONGREGATION

Requested as an aid to help clarify and prepare the Secular Branch ss.cc. Seminar

1. I state, of course, that the vocation as **laity**, like the other Christian vocations, is, that which identifies and specifies the lay person, as much as he/she is a member of the People of God, the Church, side by side with the other Christian vocations, namely that of the Priest and the Sister. It is not necessary to recall the teachings of Vatican II, the contributions of postconciliar theology, the content of diverse important ecclesiastical documents, such as the apostolic exhortations 'Christi Fideles Laici ' or 'Vita Consecrata ', the pastoral practice of the Church (in which field there is still so much to do ... so that life translates the thought of the Council), ...All this is, or should be a 'journey without return' in the building of a church-communion, the People of God and the communion of charisms in and at the service of the Body of Christ.
2. I state also the description of the phenomenon of the surprising extension of the existing desire in numerous lay Christians of participating in the spiritual richness of the consecrated life, precisely as a privileged way of realizing his/her lay Christian vocation without giving it up; and thus I give also a certain reflection on its theological foundation and manifestations, even though there is still so much to do.
3. It is also not necessary here to recall the direction that our congregation is taking in this sense.
4. It is very convenient to review the different ways laity can participate in the richness of the consecrated life, not only from the point of view of collaboration, but also, and more radically, of "adhesion" (term used in Vatican Council, n° 56) in its diverse forms. I find that going along these lines this concrete participation is what our Congregation is offering to the laity in that which we call the Secular Branch ss.cc.
5. The institutionalization of the relationship or relationships of the laity and the religious institutes is a topic that is still little elaborated. For this reason and as a means of beginning, the orientations and reflections of the General Chapters 2000 in the document on the Secular Branch are very opportune: They verify the existence of the phenomenon ("They recognize, as a movement of the spirit, the growing interest of lay men and women 'to commit themselves to live the mission and the spirit of the Congregation'"), a recognition that this is part of a wider phenomenon "the strengthening of the importance of the role of the laity in the Church based on their baptismal consecration", of affirmation that "as religious men and women we want to assume together with the laity of the Secular Branch the mission of the Congregation established in Chapter I of our Constitutions ... The Congregation perceives itself as a family of religious men and women, and laity with its own charism-in-interdependence for the common mission."

6. For this reason also, their observation “that in the present situation it is necessary to continue the process of clarifying what Secular Branch means ...” is equally important. From here derives the importance of an attitude of a humble discernment, which intends to follow the Spirit without substituting something that has not been sufficiently planned out, but trying to capture the directions that the Spirit suggests, in order to advance through them.
7. To me it seems indispensable to locate the origin of this whole phenomenon and of its particular realization in each case **the Christian’s universal call to sanctity**, and, more in particular and as a consequence of it, **the desire of the laity to live their Christian life as such**, and corresponding to the growing demands of the grace received at Baptism. Refer to LG, 42; *Christifideles laici*, 10 and 16. It is precisely for this reason, or it should be, that they look for the aid of consecrated life; there they would be able to situate the new aspect of their call to be laity of an institute in order to receive from them help in their lay Christian lives, participating in its spiritual patrimony and in its apostolic service. This is a help that is not just one requested, offered and received nor is it one that is given with an air of presumed superiority, but one of participation in solidarity, though different, in one same particular charism of following and imitating the Lord Jesús.
8. It is very important to keep focused on this topic of origin and to use it as a basic approach of discernment of the authentic desire of the one seeking to carry out his/her lay Christian vocation by participating in one way or another in the spiritual richness and in the apostolic service of an institute of consecrated life; and one should avoid by all possible means a conscious superficial or slight treatment of such a serious topic.
9. This desire does not originate in the person who experiences it, but rather **it is a Call from God, a ‘vocation’ that is directed by God**, to the person who has the grace of perceiving it. It is only in understanding and in verifying from this double foundation the desire to participate in the charism of an institute of consecrated life, that one can situate and evaluate it in its truth and in its genuine salvific sense, as much on behalf of the one who expresses the desire, as also the welcoming institute.
10. To fulfill a desire, if only to be spiritually relevant and effective, the lay person needs to convert himself/herself in a “personal option of life”, that is to say, in a global orientation of all of life in a certain direction, in answer to the felt call. It is necessary to say that it is not sufficient in order to build an entire Christian life in a particular way, to just feel a mere liking toward a style of life, not even a certain harmony or spiritual and apostolic likeness with it, although these are certainly to be esteemed and can be a source of spiritual profit. For this conversion, **it is necessary to distinguish what can be a desire, a liking or a certain harmony, from a personal option of life as an answer to a call.**
11. It is certain that all these levels of joining a religious institute are possible and all can be profitable. It is up to each institute of consecrated life to decide the considerations to be granted to each. But in any event it is important to have a clear perception of the diversity of levels without mixing nor confusing them, to be clear also in the expectations and demands that are associated to each one, and clear in the discernment of or in which each person finds himself/herself –though, temporarily - until arriving at the level of a firm personal option of life of full participation.

12. In summary, to speak of “secular branch ss.cc.” it is necessary to pass from those feelings of liking, being attracted to, to the maturity of taking on a project of personal identification. The final state would be to enter totally in order to participate fully in the spiritual richness of the consecrated life, though keeping with the characteristics of the lay state of life, and it would be necessary for the lay person to begin with a firm commitment to a personal option of life leading to a concrete way of being a Christian. I find that herein is contained the “to be or not to be” of the Secular Branch ss.cc..
13. **In consequence, the starting point of the lay and the religious is the same one: the baptismal grace and the impulse of God to fructify it as much as possible.** It is clear that one arrives gradually to this option of life (and now we reach this time), a journey of clarification and decision-making in which the rhythms of advancement can be diverse. But it is only when we have arrived there that we can really begin to walk together, as true partners on the same road. It is not easy to determine when one has arrived at this point of personal identification; it is again a matter of spiritual vocational discernment that has to be resolved in a common agreement and conformity between the ‘candidate’ who comes knocking at the door of an institute of consecrated life to share with it his/her Christian identity and this institute, in the light of the Spirit.
14. Such a “personal option of life” appears to the one who has received it as gift and grace of God, with a certain character of absolute and totality that can no longer be conditioned nor restricted except by the peculiar characteristics of this same option and of the state of the person's life that assumes it. In this sense, this option in itself is placed (or, at least, it spreads to), as a personal project, at the level of the absolute, the definitive and the total; and consequently, it doesn't admit short comings neither limitations.
15. This option (direction in life), if it is authentic, embraces (or should embrace) **the double dimension of all Christian vocation, the one referring to the person's own sanctification and the one referring to the proclamation of the Good News,** in accord always with the particular modes of the charism, its influence being desired. The true nature of the option would be falsified, if only one dimension is active: the personal sanctification or the functional participation in the apostolate. **The “adhesion” of a lay person to an institute of consecrated life assumes the whole charismatic reality of this option, without pruning it nor restricting it.** For this reason, such an adhesion cannot be partial. This would not be a correct stance in terms of ‘collaboration’ or the equivalent.
16. **Concerning the possible ways of adhering to and collaborating with the institution,** it is necessary to say that usually, given human nature as it is and the social nature of the human being, and also the tendency to disintegrate and to breakup that accompanies all human commitment and given also the incarnated nature of the Christian grace, it seems that it is necessary to look for or to elaborate the different ways of belonging. The normal situation, although it is possible to externalize the institution, will be to form appropriate structures in order to assure a clear and fruitful relationship among the institutions of religious life and laity who wish to participate in its charism and apostolate. This involves ways that for the most part are being presently created and are actually being evaluated, though there are some examples already existing, which of themselves can help to discover other similar ways. In this matter we are still in a ‘birth’ state. The Congregation has always offered to the laity some form of organized participation of its spirituality, charism and mission.

17. May the above-mentioned serve as a mark to understand something about the nature of the secular branch ss.cc., what it is and what it means, how it identifies the lay member and characterizes him/her. While focusing on the expressions 'identity' and 'specificity' of the 'lay person in our Congregation', I'll mention some other reflections that come to me.

IDENTITY

1. The word **Identity** evokes in me the question of who is the lay person in our Congregation, what is his profile, his precise description, definition, existential configuration. In this context, I would say that it is someone who builds his Christian identity in reference to and in participation with the charism, the spirituality and the mission ss.cc.
2. When one approaches the first Chapter of the Constitutions it doesn't take much to appreciate it as a proposal for a Christian way of life, before which any baptized person could feel interested. And if this baptized person would begin to approach, to journey and identify himself/herself with the spirit of this document, incorporating those features that conform and model a certain profile of the believer, that person's Christian life would acquire a certain determined form. These are features that can end up being as one's own skin, that more deeply configures him/her. I don't doubt that that way of seeing and of living for God, that that manner of following Jesús ('consecrated to the Sacred Hearts'), that that type of mission of which we describe, ... is not or cannot be in a lay person – by way of analogy as it occurs to me, religious-: something of which I cannot shake off, because "spending many years" living in this way, I cannot possibly envision myself without including something fundamental of that ss.cc. identity. I can only affirm that my way of being a Christian is being ss.cc. In that sense, when we say, or when I say "laity in our Congregation", I continue referring along these lines of thought (and on this I was asked to write, if I'm not mistaken) to this portrait description of identity ss.cc. contained in the General Statutes of the Secular Branch, to be used when the charism, the spirituality and the mission of the congregation of the Sacred Hearts is "reread" for the laity, using the first chapter of the Constitutions of the Congregation (see especially articles 1-3)
3. Of course that which I have just said is part of the "identity of the lay person in the Congregation." But the layperson ss.cc. doesn't give up, neither subtract nor impair anything of his/her –we could say– "identity at entrance", that which the layperson has as he/she comes knocking at the door, when the layperson actually begins to approach and take the journey with the Congregation as a baptized layperson. Rather, "he unites and integrates" synergistically what he receives of the Congregation (the participation in the charism, spirituality and mission ss.cc.) in his "entrance identity", this baptized lay man or woman, subject to that "universal call to sanctity" that is, to the vocation common to all Christians; this is their starting point. And it is **in, from within, across and not in the margin**, in the thickness of this same "lay condition" that as it is assimilated, it is embodied and projected as "charismatic ss.cc. identity", in all its facets.
4. I don't see that "Sacred Hearts, faith in the personal love of God, zeal, contemplate-live-announce the love of God, reparation, eucharist, adoration, family spirit,....." and other key words of our charism, are able to be lived lightly, but should be taken and lived in their globalization as is "vocation." That is to say, lived as something that one

“plans”, the concrete element of the configuration of that lay Christian vocation that he/she wants to live (see Gen. Statutes 4, 12). The secular branch members should communicate with one another, discussing and reflecting on this means that is proposed by the congregation after having focused on the lay condition of those to whom this possibility is offered, a way to participate in the charism, spirituality and mission of the Congregation.

5. If the lessons of the history of religious life and that of our Congregation were not sufficiently clear in themselves (in relation to the phenomenon of today “to drink in common fountains from different states of life or condition to give birth to an initial intuition or shared charism”), it would be also very enlightening to approach that ecclesial phenomenon that is so strong that it dares call forth other “new ecclesial movements.” (we treat here a reality with its values and also with some aspects that cause worry and incite reservations in some and also in me.)
6. There is characterized in each one of these “ecclesial movements”– as anything ‘new’ that gives birth to life in the long history of the church – a fundamental intuition (be it in a way to see and live for God, to see and impact reality, ...) which focuses on the unfolding of all other “points of view.” Starting from there, one can plan to discover one’s charism, to discover one’s ‘identity’. But that which has caught my attention from the beginning and that which I’m interested in highlighting is something else: it concerns a charism, of one ‘identity’, which is thought about in order to live and is lived in fact in the different states of life and conditions that the believers see themselves in, in the baptized (in contemplative and in active, in masculine and in feminine, in virginity and in matrimony, in priesthood and in other secular involvements) ... **It is not something, therefore that is indissolubly united to only one of the Christian vocational calls (lay, religious, priest, ...) but something destined to be lived, to be incarnated inside the dynamic vitality inherent to each one of these calls and to the variety of situations of the life of the baptized believers**, so that it imparts a substantial part of that “symbolic capital” with the one who builds his own global, existential identity, in each believer. And not simply as something that adheres, but is configured and gives a profile, and does not come from the outside, but from within.
7. Well then, for those of us who have a history, of at least many years in our life, in “charismatic identity ss.cc.” and “identity of religious life,” though these overlap in the absolute, to the point of confusion ... I find that the previous reflection can help a great deal to see things in another way and in the direction that is suggested, without too much resistance.
8. There is a concern that I’ve had for some time, the uncertainty and lack of clarity when we’ve discussed the genuineness of the “lay” in sharing the spirituality, charism and mission of the Congregation, and in that context be incorporated in it and become part of it. Or, in other words, that the charism ss.cc. be seen not as a patrimony of anyone, but as something realized or vitally incarnated in the different states of life, and each one would have to articulate it with autonomy and at the same time with interdependence.
9. Some aspects could be pointed out that conform to the “lay identity ss.cc.” as: an identity highly lay, a vision and ecclesial living as a communion of charisms, a key to shared mission, the delving deeply into life and Christian commitment which embodies and looks for inspiration in the charism, spirituality and mission of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts.... And all of this lived with a certain dimension of communion among the members, but in accord with that which belongs to and is definition of the lay condition. This is part and parcel of an “ecclesial identity with its

own 'lay' color" which is in harmony with the spirituality, charism and mission of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts as lived in the lay state, throughout their present day life, and in the conditions of that life, in the family, in marriage, at work, in the office, in town, in the parish,...

SPECIFICITY / DESCRIPTION

1. When one is looking for something "specific" one tries to identify that which is different from others. To my way of seeing things, the first glance should not be to look for something different, but to look toward that which is in common, and only after searching for that, then for what is different. I've always considered that that which is the same is the most important; in any case, it seems to me that it is more important to say what a person **is** rather than how the person is **different** from others. I've been concerned that the question on specificity could be less appreciated than the first, 'what identifies me', though in part, that which identifies me more completely is something which differentiates me from others and for that reason 'specifies' or describes me within that which is shared.
2. At times I have heard and also said that only in the measure that we do not have "sufficient identity" do we question the 'difference', that which is specific, and then we become aware of the 'other identities', as a threat to our own. It could be that this is one of the greatest obstacles (there are other difficulties in the line of organization, such as the articulation of the mutual relationship, for example) to generous openness of the Congregation, of the Provinces, in the pastoral ministries, in the heart of each one of the Brothers and Sisters of the Congregation, to a strong 'lay life ss.cc.' I believe that this is the way it has been at times, especially in the last years and I am afraid that that is the way it is going to continue to be though partially ...Anyway, I rejoice with all the news that comes, ever more frequent, telling us about the Commitment Ceremonies of the Secular Branch ss.cc. in one or other Province of the Congregation, which the INFO provides us ...; despite the obstacles, something new is rising in that direction.
3. I go on now to share some reflections about "that which is specific to the laity in our Congregation." Many explanations about the General Statutes of the Secular Branch treat this topic, which in one way or another is analyzed and described to a greater extent in the letter "The Mission Unites Us and Identifies Us" addressed at that time to the laity of the Secular Branch ss.cc. by the General Governments (by way of their delegates for the Secular Branch, at that time Manfred Kollig and Lourdes Fernandez). They try to shed light on this topic by differentiating the religious brother/sister ss.cc. and the laity of the Secular Branch, and by differentiating also the laity of the Secular Branch with other types of bonds to the Congregation, or to some of its ministries. Especially important and appropriate with the initial position of my reflections is the response to the topic "that which distinguishes the vocation and mission of a lay person as member of the secular branch: "In discussing this vocation and mission, we are not alluding to just one moment or to a concrete action in one's own life. To be a member of the Secular Branch signifies the intent to have all of one's lay life modeled by the ss.cc. charism, that is all of life, wherever it might be, in the friendships, in the family, in one's profession...".
4. Neither do I want to repeat what the exhortation 'Vita Consecrata' states concerning the joining of laity to a religious Institute by participating in its charism, spirituality and mission, which one can see in numbers 54, 55, and 56 specifically.
5. In my case, as I am religious ss.cc., the charismatic identity ss.cc. is embodied and involves an option of life, that of the consecrated life, marked by the profession of the

religious vows as total form of life, which is the particular road for me to follow Jesus in answer to his call (vocation).^{*} But that which is still the most significant of the “consecrated life”, thus called ‘Consecrated Religious’, becomes **colored** by my participation in the charism, spirituality and mission ss.cc. As the CIVCSVA said in 1990 in the “orientations for the initial formation of Religious’ (OFIR): there isn’t one uniform way of observing the evangelical counsels, but let each institute define its proper manner ‘taking into account its finances and own character’ (c.598,l)’; or as our own Constitutions state, art. 13: “We live the consecration inherent in any religious profession as our “consecration to the Sacred Hearts” as ‘consecration to the ss.cc’. That is to say, that my identity is not complete in saying “I am a religious”, but “I am an ss.cc. religious”; but that which specifies me, that which distinguishes me, that which makes me different – from other ways of realizing the christian life, and also in respect to other ways of living the ss.cc. charism – it isn’t to belong to an ‘ss.cc.’, but to be it, living it, incarnating it in and within a ‘form of life’ which we call ‘religious life’ or ‘consecrated life’.

6. Following in the same line as that of the previous reflection: What will be that which describes, that which differentiates the lay of the secular branch from others who share in the charism, spirituality and mission ss.cc., being a good part of their global identity? The difference or specificity is not found in that which is common to them, but in the reality or condition of life in which they are involved and in which the ss.cc. charism is embodied in its global aspect, being the type of life that is ‘characteristic of the lay life’ having a certain anthropological, existential opportunities, resources ... different from other states of life, as that of the religious life, for example.
7. And what will be that which is specific to the lay ss.cc. and that which differentiates them from other lay, whoever they be, or concretely from others who work with us, or who are close to us? Well in talking about the ‘Secular Branch’ we are talking about an ss.cc. identity that touches more of the being than of the doing; the vocational and that which is stable in their life; the structural existence and assumed fundamentality of their greater and more globalized identity than something more peripheral, though this might be considered very important. “We think that our spirituality of the Sacred Hearts should mark the life and mission of the committed laity, before any other missionary task”, you say in your letter.
8. For that reason, that which describes the Secular Branch ss.cc. “ is a linking that exists, not only in doing things, nor only in living a spirituality, but rather a conjugal effort that binds both the mystical and political dimension (that which, on the other hand, is generally a part of all charism in the life of religious families), and furthermore it is a bond which needs a communitarian dimension (one is integrated as lay, and is also linked to others in a community,... and in relationship to other groups - for example, the youth or the adult communities that exist in our parishes.). It could be said that the reference to the spirituality, charism and mission of the Congregation has a more institutional and more decisive character, even at the public level, in the secular branch.
9. And all the above-mentioned could lead me to make some final statements about the **laity of the secular branch in our Congregation**. The lay ss.cc. - in and with the Congregation, the same as in and with the Church of which she/he is a part – establishes or can establish a multitude of ways of relationship and interaction, ... but this is no longer the topic upon which I have been requested to reflect.