

## THE RELIGIOUS VOCATION<sup>1</sup>

POPE PIUS XII

*Discourse to the Delegates to the first international Congress of Religious Orders, Congregations, Societies and Secular Institutes, at Rome  
8th December, 1950*

**T**HE Holy Year, which, through no merit of Ours but by the mercy of God, has been productive of greater benefits than it was humanly possible to foretell, has, in a wonderful series of public manifestations, given evidence of the great faith and fullness of life in the Church of Christ, our Mother. Among these important events your congress, your brotherly meeting, appearing among them as a shining light, now comes to take its place; it gives Us pleasure to welcome you with words of affection.

Church history shows no parallel of a meeting like the one which has recently taken place whereat its members, chosen from among those who are resolved on the goal of evangelical perfection, met in this notable congress to discuss their common interests and take counsel together.

In Our judgment the time was ripe for such an undertaking. For changed conditions for which the Church must make allowance, certain doctrinal trends about the constitution and state of moral perfection, and the pressing necessities of that apostolate to which you readily devote yourselves with all generosity—all these were so many reasons which impelled you to embark upon these discussions and studies.

Your work has now reached its final stage. It was inspired by careful reflection, it gave rise to many proposals, it will be no less fruitful, We hope, for the increase of religious virtues. With your willing co-operation the grace of God will rouse up these virtues in you, that grace which your prayers and works of religious mortification, and especially those of your sisters in Christ, have called down on the task which you have undertaken. As a fitting conclusion to your congress and as a pledge of divine help and

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inspiration you have asked for the fatherly blessing of Christ's Vicar. Before imparting it to you We consider it useful to explain certain notions in connection with the religious life which, properly understood, will serve to regulate your thoughts and actions.

## I

First and foremost, what is, briefly, the position of religious orders and congregations in the Church? You know, indeed, that our Redeemer founded the Church on a hierarchical basis; for he made a clear distinction between the apostles and their successors on the one hand, with whom must be included those who assist them in their office, and on the other the ordinary faithful. These two groups, however, taken together make up the kingdom of God upon earth. Wherefore by divine law it is laid down that clerics are to be distinguished from the laity (cf. Can. 107). Between these two categories comes the religious state, which is of ecclesiastical origin and as such whatever reality and value the religious state has comes to it from its close connection with the one end for which the Church exists; for it is the purpose of the religious state to lead men in the ways of holiness. Although every Christian under the guidance of the Church is to scale this holy mount, yet religious do so by a way of their own and with assistance of a higher kind.

Moreover, the religious state is not reserved to one or other of the two categories which by divine ordinance exist in the Church, since the clergy and the laity alike may both be religious and since, on the other hand, the clerical state is open both to those who are religious and those who are not. It is therefore erroneous and contrary to the constitution of the Church as Christ founded it to maintain that whereas the distinctive form of the secular clergy, that is precisely as secular, has been established by our divine Redeemer, the distinctive form of the regular clergy, though good in itself and approved, has been derived from the former, and so is secondary and ancillary to it. The truth of the matter is that neither form as such enjoys the divine prerogative. This is clear if we consider the arrangement ordained by Christ; for the divine law neither subordinated the one to the other, nor established the one to the exclusion of the other. Christ in fact left it to the Church to determine, in accordance with the changes and needs of the times, the differences between each form, the features

peculiar to each and the charges to be given to each in the work of saving souls.

Undoubtedly by divine law a priest, whether secular or regular, exercises his ministry in collaboration with and under the direction of the bishop. Moreover, following the custom of the Church, this is very clearly laid down in the code of Canon Law (Can. 626-631; 454, §5) concerning religious who are parish priests and local Ordinaries. It often happens that in missionary territories the whole of the clergy, including the bishop, belongs to a religious order. Nor should it be supposed that this is an abnormal and extraordinary state of affairs: a mere temporary holding of a sacred charge to be relinquished and handed over to the secular clergy as soon as circumstances permit.

Furthermore, the exemption of religious orders is in no way contrary to the divine constitution bestowed on the Church, nor is it in any way incompatible with the law by which a priest owes obedience to the bishop. For according to Canon Law exempt religious are subject to their local bishop in so far as the episcopal office and the proper regulation of the care of souls require. But even leaving that aside, perhaps it has not been made sufficiently clear in the discussions about such matters that have taken place in the last ten years, that exempt religious, as Canon Law itself states, submit themselves always and everywhere to the authority of the Roman Pontiff as their highest superior and so are bound to obey him in virtue of their vow of obedience (Can. 499, §1). For just as the Supreme Pontiff possesses ordinary and immediate jurisdiction over the whole Church, so does he over every diocese and over each one of the faithful. Therefore it is clear that the fundamental divine law by which clerics and the laity are subject to the jurisdiction of the bishop is complied with to the full in the case of exempt religious. Ultimately, then, both categories of the clergy comply in a similar way with the will and precept of Christ.

## II

There is another matter connected with what has been said above that we should like to explain and elucidate; namely the obligation of clerics and religious to tend to perfection. It is erroneous to assert that the clerical state as such, and based as it is on divine precept, requires by its very nature or at least by reason of certain postulates of its nature that its members should observe

the evangelical counsels and on this account should, or could, be called a state (for the acquiring) of evangelical perfection. Therefore the cleric as such is not bound by divine law to the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience; and more especially he is not bound in the same way as religious are who by reason of their public profession of vows have an obligation in this respect. But that does not prevent a cleric taking these vows of his own accord and privately. Likewise, although priests of the Latin rite are bound to holy celibacy, this does not abrogate or lessen the distinction between the clerical and religious state. For the cleric who is a religious professes his manner of life and state of evangelical perfection not as a cleric but as a religious.

Although in Our Apostolic constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia* We laid down that the way of life followed by Secular Institutes must be publicly acknowledged as a state of evangelical perfection because their members are, in some manner, bound to the observance of the evangelical counsels, yet this in no way contradicts what We said above. There is then no reason why clerics should not associate together in a Secular Institute and tend to a state of evangelical perfection by choosing this kind of life, but in so doing they belong to a state tending to perfection not precisely as clerics but as members of a Secular Institute. The counsels of evangelical perfection are indeed proper to the religious state, and therein are realised in their highest form; but in the measure in which they are observed in the Secular Institutes they constitute a way of life, complete in itself, quite distinct from the religious life and with an external form by no means necessarily conformed to that of the religious state.

### III

It will be useful to consider at length the reasons for entering the religious state.

There are some who assert, and their opinion cannot be ignored, that the religious state from its very nature and purpose is nothing more than a place of refuge for the weak and timorous: unable to stand up to the hazards of a stormy life, helpless in the face of difficulties or unwilling to meet them, they are led by their folly to quit the world and seek shelter in the quiet of monastic life; instead of which, confidence in God's grace and in themselves should be awakened in them so that they might cease to hanker

after the life of unruffled quietude which they have conjured up for themselves and make bold to enter the struggle of every-day life. What truth is there in this assertion?

It is not Our intention here to pass judgment on the motives which induce any individual to enter the religious state, but We wish to make known the principal reason, the true reason, for taking such a step. It is certainly different from that set out above which, if it were made to apply to all, would be false and unjust. For whether we are concerned with entering the priesthood or the religious life the ideal which we put before ourselves, as well as perseverance in its accomplishment, requires nobility of soul and generous self-sacrifice. The history of the Church, which recounts for us the great deeds of the saints and of the founders of the religious orders, which narrates the story of the missions and reveals examples of true asceticism, taken together with the ordinary experience of life, demonstrates quite clearly that there have been as many men of high courage and generosity of soul in the religious state as in the world. How then can it be said of religious men and women, labouring to spread the kingdom of the Gospel, caring for the sick, educating youth, and devoting themselves to scholastic work, that they are withdrawing themselves from human society and are not interested in the affairs of their fellow men? Are not most of them, in fact, like the secular clergy and lay auxiliaries, in the forefront of the battle for the defence of the Church's cause?

We cannot help pointing out a fact which is entirely in opposition to the assertion mentioned above. If the number of those, particularly of young women, who desire to enter that enclosed garden, which is the religious life, is lessening, the reason is that it is found too difficult to give up personal judgment and part with freedom, all of which is implied by the vow of obedience. Some even go so far as to place at the summit of moral perfection not the complete surrender of personal freedom for the love of Christ but some shadowy form of this self-denial, and consequently for the formation of a righteous and holy man they would formulate the following rule: Restrict freedom only so far as it cannot be avoided; give full rein to freedom wherever possible.

For the present let us leave aside any consideration of the question whether the new foundation which is proposed for the building of holiness would be as fruitful or as sound to sustain and

develop the apostolic work of the Church as has been for fifteen hundred years the old rule of obedience accepted out of love for Christ. But it is of the utmost importance to examine in detail this new rule of sanctity to uncover what lies hidden within it. Careful consideration reveals that this rule fails completely to recognise the true nature of the evangelical counsel, and even gives it in some respects a meaning contrary to its nature. No one is obliged as a duty to bind himself to perfect obedience, founded on a rule of life which calls for renunciation of his self-will: no one, we repeat, whether in the case of individuals or of associations. One can, if he so desires, live according to this new rule. But words should be understood and used in accordance with their meaning, and this rule, compared with the vow of obedience, does not possess the same supreme value; nor does it embody the spirit of the supreme example set before us in the words of Holy Scripture: 'He humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death' (Phil. 2, 8.)

If then anyone should seek advice about entering the religious life, it is error and deception to neglect all consideration of his natural inclinations and of the inspiration of divine grace, and propose to him the above opinion as the norm to be followed. Thus if such a one feels drawn by God towards the highest state of evangelical perfection, and there are true signs of his vocation, there must be no hesitation in proposing to him the way to fulfil this holy intention, namely the free sacrifice of his own liberty as the vow of obedience requires, the vow which the Church for so many centuries has tried, defined, and approved. No one should be compelled to make this vow unwillingly, but if he desires to do so there must be no attempt to dissuade him from it or to prevent him.

#### IV

We must now say something about external works and the spiritual life. Among matters of high importance concerning regular life and the religious life in general few have been treated at greater length than these. Nevertheless we should like to make known to you our own opinion in these matters.

Not without reason has our epoch seen the rise and development of that philosophical system called Existentialism. For men of the present age confronted with difficult metaphysical or religious problems deliberately ignore the more profound realities

and consider it sufficient to do whatever the circumstances of the moment dictate. But one who makes profession of our holy faith will refuse to concern himself merely with the passing moment or allow himself to drift through life in accordance with such sentiments. He knows that things which cannot be seen (cf. Heb. 11, 1) are to be held in the highest account, that they are supremely true, will endure in the future and are imperishable. Unfortunately, in spite of innumerable warnings and exhortations, even ecclesiastics, religious not excepted, have been infected with these ideas, and although they do not deny what is beyond man's understanding and the natural order yet they hold it in little esteem. Has that which was in such great danger now emerged triumphant? Thanks be to God, we have every reason to hope so; what we now witness, in the light of experience, imbues us with this hope.

The most overwhelming activity can be combined with the acquisition of the riches of the spiritual life. Two stars who shine for their devotedness to the regular life prove it in a most wonderful way: St Francis Xavier and St Teresa of Jesus.

Keeness for work and a solicitude for the spiritual life ought not merely to go together but should proceed apace in one's estimation and love. Consequently the greater the attention which is given to works the more fitting it is that fervour in faith, prayer and dedication to God, purity of conscience, obedience, patience, and a watchful, active charity towards God and our neighbour should increase.

This does not apply merely to individual religious, who should be in their heart what their outward habit professes, but it is of importance also for each religious society as a whole, to have in the sight of God and man a well-established religious life worthy of high regard. What the Church earnestly asks of you is to harmonise your exterior work with your spiritual life and to establish a proper balance between the two. For do you not all, clerics and laity, make profession of a state of evangelical perfection? If this is so, bring forth its fruits so that the Mystical Body of Christ which is the Church may draw increasing energy from your strength and fervour. It is for this reason that the contemplative orders are in some way necessary to the Church and remain her lasting glory and fount of heavenly graces.

You know well how it is commonly said that charity to one's neighbour is gradually losing its religious significance and be-

coming secularised. But beneficence which is not founded on faith is not charity and cannot be called Catholic. Charity has a dignity, an inspiration and energy which mere philanthropy even backed by funds and resources entirely lacks. For example, Catholic nuns who nurse the sick, in comparison with those who perform the same work for merely humanitarian motives, or solely as a means of livelihood, have qualities which are different and more exalted. Their technical equipment may be less, though we exhort them at this present time not to allow themselves to be surpassed on this score, but to take the lead. Nevertheless, wherever there are religious working with the spirit of their order truly in their hearts, ready each day, for love of Christ, to give their lives for the sick, then there is an atmosphere in which virtue effects such wonders as neither technical inventions nor medical men can accomplish.

Consequently orders and congregations which make profession of the active life should keep before them and cultivate whatever will make manifest the divine character of their work and will kindle the fire of the Holy Spirit in the depths of the pure in heart.

## V

Dearly beloved, We wish also to mention briefly the desire of religious orders to adjust themselves to the changes of the times and so happily combine the new with the old.

When young people hear such things as 'we must keep abreast of the times', 'we must adapt ourselves to the changes of the times', an unwonted fervour fills their hearts, and if they belong to a religious order they ardently desire to see changes introduced in the future work of the order. To some extent this is as it should be. Generally, in fact, founders of religious orders have conceived their new undertaking in the light of the pressing and urgent necessities or needs of the Church, and so have adapted it to the needs of their times. If you would follow in the footsteps of your fathers, model yourselves on them and do as they did. Study the opinions, the judgments and habits of those among whom you live and whatever you find in them that is good and right, treasure it and make it your own; otherwise you will be quite incapable of enlightening, helping, sustaining or directing them.

But the Church has a heritage which from the very beginning has been kept intact, which does not change in the course of



centuries and remains ever peculiarly adapted to the needs and desires of humanity. Its principal component is the Catholic faith which quite recently We defended against new dangers in the Encyclical *Humani generis*. Keep this faith with the greatest care, free from blemish, and be assured that it contains within itself a strength powerful enough to mould the character of any period of history.

Then, also, to this same patrimony belongs the end of the state of perfection towards which you should tend with your whole strength so that by its help and assistance you may become saints yourselves and, directly or indirectly, help those around you by making them share more abundantly in divine grace and so help them to live a holy life and die a holy death. Here, too, is contained the lofty and important truth that there is but one road to perfection which is the denial of self for the love of Christ. That does not change with the changing times.

All the same, there are many accessory matters wherein you can and indeed should comply with the present outlook of men and the necessities of your own times. In great part that has already been done, and now your present deliberations, discussions and proposals have perfected it. Already many of your activities have been adapted excellently, as is shown in many ways by your work, either as individuals or as an order, in colleges, in the education of youth, in the relief of suffering and in the promotion and encouragement of learning. So it must be recognised, and no one will contradict Our assertion, that your achievement in adaptation to the needs of the times is already considerable. But in thus seeking to conform yourselves to a changing world it is extremely important, in Our view, for you to discover by careful inquiry what are the latent spiritual resources in your contemporaries, what secret desires animate them, and what their personal outlook really is. We do not mean that attitude which finds expression in sinful or scandalous deeds and shows itself in unleashed passion and shameful vice. In every man, considered as a man, and still more considered as a Christian, there is some good quality and a desire for better things, even when he is led astray and enmeshed in sin. You should endeavour to follow these impulses, to uncover these desires, being careful, nevertheless, not to take from the world what is evil in it and unworthy, but rather to impart to it your own good and holy qualities that are in keeping with its

better impulses. Any good therefore that you observe in others, however imperfect it may be, should, with your help, be made to grow and be brought to perfection as the particles of gold are formed into a precious vessel, or as the streams which flow together into a mighty river.

Some think, and perhaps they are right, that there are three things which answer to the character and tendencies of the present age: freedom of thought and expression, unity in government and organisation, forthrightness in action. Do not these three qualities also fit the Gospel as its marks and notes? Are they not the qualities of those who by word and deed make profession of Catholicism? Could our thoughts embrace a wider orbit than that sketched by the Apostle: 'All are yours: and you are Christ's; and Christ is God's' (1 Cor. 3, 23)? Is there a closer union of understanding and love than that simple unity expressed in holy Scripture: 'That God may be all in all' (1 Cor. 15, 28); '... Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole mind and with thy whole strength. . . . Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself' (Mark 12, 30-1)? And to encourage us to be prompt and forthright, Scripture warns us of the evil of inactivity caused by dwelling on the past: 'No man putting his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fitted for the kingdom of God' (Luke 9, 62). If you would have models of virtue who have earned this threefold commendation, consider the apostle Paul and all those who in Christ's Church have done wonderful deeds worthy of lasting remembrance.

The purpose of your lives of contemplation or action, as indeed of the lives of all the children of the Church, whether priests or laity, is Christian perfection and the salvation of mankind. Nevertheless it is your business to use the most effectual means, that is, the evangelical counsels by the profession of the vows of religion, so that by continual warfare you may bring into subjection the concupiscence of the flesh and of the eye and the pride of life (cf. 1 John 2, 16); and in this way you will make yourselves holy and become fervent ministers of God for the salvation of mankind. Turn, then, your thoughts and direct your works to these lofty ends, and, 'rooted and founded in charity' (Ephesians 3, 17), made strong by faith, well-dowered with humility, let slip no opportunity of bringing mankind, your brothers, back to their Creator and Redeemer, as wandering sheep to their Shepherd.

As trustworthy and faithful models let your lives be in conformity with your profession. According to the saying of the Apostle, be 'careful to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Ephesians 4, 3); let peace reign in you and amongst you, amongst the members of each order and of each community, and between the members of the different orders; between you and all others who labour with you and with whom you labour to win men to Christ. Let controversy and discord cease, for they enfeeble and render ineffectual undertakings begun even in full hope. The Church displays a wide, immense field for apostolic labours in which opportunity for work and toil is closed to none.

If the faith of a religious finds guaranty in the examples of his life whose whole tenor reflects unflinching fidelity to his vows, if the priest allows no obstacle to check his zeal for the salvation of souls, then of them too will it be verified today what the Apostle said of the word of God—that it is 'living and effectual, and more piercing than any two-edged sword . . .' (Heb. 4, 12). As an example We may take the counsel We recently gave to the faithful: in these dreadful days when the state of many, reduced to misery and widespread poverty, is in stark contrast to the sumptuous expenditure of others, We exhorted the faithful to reduce their style of living and show generosity towards their needy neighbours. Press forward, then, and by your example lead others in this very important, urgent undertaking of Christian perfection, justice and charity, and encourage them to follow Christ.

Lastly, ardently desiring that the helping hand of our Lord may bring forth from your congress rich and lasting results, with Our whole heart and as a sign of our affection We grant to you here present and to the religious orders scattered throughout the world the Apostolic blessing.