

SECULAR INSTITUTES: A Symposium. (Blackfriars Publications; 5s. 6d.)

The present Holy Father has defined Secular Institutes as 'Societies, whether clerical or lay, whose members profess the evangelical counsels in the world as their aim, in order to attain Christian perfection and the full exercise of the apostolate'. Neither the idea nor the wording is completely new, though the title as it stands is. In the first half of the last century associations of this type already began to be established, and received from the Holy See the status of '*piæ sodalitates*'. Their scope was 'to follow the evangelical counsels . . . and to undertake with greater freedom those duties of charity which the religious orders were almost, or even absolutely, prevented from carrying out, owing to the evils of the times'. (S. C. Epis. Reg., 11th August, 1889.) To this description the Pope, in his *Provida Mater* of 2nd February, 1947, has added the words, 'in the world', which indicate the secular or lay character of these institutes which have come into being as part of the organic life of the Church.

This book throws a good deal of light on these Institutes which have now been placed on a permanent footing. As organic bodies they do approximate to religious institutes, without losing their lay character. It seems certain that their purpose is apostolic, and that it is not sufficient for their constitution to have as their aim the Christian perfection of the members, as some have tried to maintain. It is therefore useful to be given here the canonical framework in which they must be placed if they are to exist. Perhaps then Miss Fry, who collected most of the materials, overstates her case in the introduction, and seems to contradict what is said in the following pages.

A feature of these Secular Institutes is that the members bind themselves privately to the three evangelical counsels, by vow, oath or consecration (the English rendering of *and* for *or* is incorrect), and are not obliged to live the community life. The translation of the *Provida Mater* should have distinguished between commendation, the *decretum laudis*, and approbation, which are three stages in which the Holy See gives recognition to these institutes. By the two latter alone they cease to be purely diocesan.

Many will be grateful for this Symposium as an introduction to a way of life consecrated to God whilst living in the world, and having the full approval of the Church. But as the Pope has wisely said, 'We have to guard against the constant rise of fresh Institutes, the foundations of which are not infrequently insecurely and imprudently laid'.

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