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Message of the Holy Father Francis to the participants in the Italian Conference of Secular Institutes

From 28 to 29 October in Rome, at the Augustinianum Patristic Institute, the Italian Conference of Secular Institutes (CIIS) is gathered, with the patronage of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic life, to reflect on the theme: “Beyond and within. Secular institutes: stories of passion and prophecy for God and for the world”, on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesiae*.

The following is the Message sent by the Holy Father Francis to the participants at the opening of the Conference:

Message of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

On the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesiae*, the Italian Conference of Secular Institutes, with the patronage of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life, has gathered to reflect on the theme “*Beyond and within. Secular institutes: stories of passion and prophecy for God and for the world*”. I address my cordial greeting to you all, wishing you a fruitful conference.

That document of Pope Pius XII was in a certain sense revolutionary: indeed, it outlined a new form of consecration, that of the lay faithful and diocesan priests called to live evangelical counsel in the secular life in which they are immersed, on account of their existential condition or their pastoral ministry. The newness and fruitfulness of the Secular Institutes lies therefore in the conjugation of consecration and secularity, practising an apostolate of witness, of evangelization – especially for priests – and of Christian commitment in social life, especially for the laity, to which fraternity is added which, without being determined by a community of life, is in any case true communion.

In the wake of *Provida Mater*, you are called today to be humble and passionate bearers, in Christ and in His Spirit, of the meaning of the world and of history. Your passion is born of the ever-new wonder for the Lord Jesus, for His unique way of living and of loving, of encountering the people, of healing life, of bringing comfort. Therefore, your “staying within” the world is not only a sociological condition but also a theological reality, which enables you to remain attentive, to see, to listen, to sympathize with, to rejoice with, to intuit needs.

This means being prophetic presences in a very concrete world. It means bringing to the world, in the situations in which you find yourselves, the world of God that is to be heard. It is this that truly characterizes secular life: knowing how to say that world that God has to say to the world. Where “to say” does not mean so much “to speak” as “to act”. We say what God wants to say to the world, *acting* in the world. This is very important. Especially in a time such as ours, in which, faced with difficulties, there can be the temptation to isolate oneself in one’s own comfortable and safe environments and withdraw from the world. You too could fall prey to this temptation. But your place is to “stay within”, as a transforming presence in an evangelical sense. It is certainly difficult, it is a road that involves the cross, but the Lord wants to journey it with you.

Your vocation and mission is to be attentive, on the one hand, to the realities that surround you, always asking: what is happening? without stopping at what appears on the surface but going deeper; and at the same time, to the mystery of God, to recognize where He is manifest. Attentive to the world, with your heart immersed in God.

I would like, finally, to suggest spiritual attitudes that may help you on this path and that may be summarized in five verbs: to pray, to discern, to share, to give courage, and to have sympathy.

Pray, to be joined to God, close to His heart. Listen to His voice, before every event in life, living a luminous existence that takes the Gospel in hand and takes it seriously.

Discern, to be able to distinguish essential things from ancillary ones; this means refining that wisdom, cultivating it day by day, to enable you to see what responsibilities it is necessary to take on, and what the priority tasks are. It is a personal but also a community path, and so individual effort is not enough.

Share the fate of every man and woman: even if the world’s events are tragic and dark, I do not abandon the fate of the world because I love it, as and with Jesus, unto the end.

Give courage: with the grace of Christ never lose trust, which knows how to see good in everything. It is also an invitation we receive in every Eucharistic celebration: Lift up your hearts”.

Have sympathy for the world and for the people. Even when they do everything to make you lose it, be animated by the sympathy that comes to us from the Spirit of Christ, that makes us free and passionate, that makes us “stay within” like salt and leaven.

Dear brothers and sisters, you are able to be in the world like the soul in the body (cf. *Letter to Diognetus*, VI, 1), witnesses to the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus. This is my wish for you, which I accompany with my prayer and my blessing.

From the Vatican, 23 October 2017
