

REGNUM MARIAE: CONSECRATED LIFE IN THE WORLD

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“Consecrated life in the world”: not everybody is familiar with this phrase, so it might be helpful to try to explain it.

The new life that we have received as a gift through baptismal consecration, may result in either marriage or a ‘special consecration’. This latter term includes religious life, monastic life, and consecrated life in the world. The Secular Institutes, representing consecrated life in the world, are associations of consecrated people living in the world and seeking its sanctification from within, according to the Holy Spirit’s directives. The three vows of chastity, poverty and obedience are the common distinguishing feature of each and every consecrated man or woman.

The secular institutes date back to the early 20th century. They were formally recognized by Pope Pius XII in 1947, as the Holy Spirit’s gift to the Church as well as a new and original form of consecrated life, whose role is to be Christian leaven for the upbuilding of the Kingdom of God in the world.

The Code of Canon Law (1983) identifies them so: institutes “of consecrated life in which the Christian faithful living in the world strive for the perfection of charity and work for the sanctification of the world especially from within.” (can. 710)

The members of these institutes “share in the Church’s evangelizing task in the world and of the world through their witness of a Christian life and fidelity toward their consecration, and through their efforts to order temporal things according to God and inform the world by the power of the gospel.” (can. 713 § 2)

Regnum Mariae is a secular institute. Our Rule of Life introduces us so:

“‘Regnum Mariae’ (RM) is a secular institute made up of people who have been called to live their consecration to God in the world, in a spirit of service. It was started within the Order of the Servants of Mary: its wish is, and always will be, to live in fraternal communion with the Order.”

Starting from this very introduction, I will try to highlight how our own style of consecration in the world derives from the spirituality spreading from Mount Senario, home of the Servants of Mary.

Mount Senario is so dear, and so important to us. It reminds us of the very origins of the Order of the Servants, as well as of the first Seven Fathers’ love for God, the Virgin Mary, and the world. They settled on Mt Senario so that their love for God could grow, as well as their love for one another, and their withdrawal from the world was to be a clear sign of their love for the world.

The *Legenda de Origine* (Legend of the Origins) relates that many people were drawn by the holiness and virtue of the Seven Fathers. Those people said to one another:

“Why are we hesitating to go out to visit these servants of the Lord from whom such fragrance of virtue is emanating? Why do we not get to know them? Come, let us take ourselves to this Monte Sonaio (‘Sonorous’), sonorous and sweet-smelling mountain of the

Lord. When we get to the top we will find there those godly men whose reputation has reached our ears. We can learn the ways of the Lord from the words we will hear there, words aflame with charity, and guided by their holiness we can make a firm decision to walk the paths of the Lord.” (n° 45; pp. 245-246)

OUR OWN IDENTITY

The Epilogue of our Rule ends with the hymn of thanksgiving that the Apostle Paul raises to the Lord:

“This, then, is what I pray, kneeling before the Father, from whom every fatherhood, in Heaven or on earth, takes its name. In the abundance of His glory may He, through the Spirit, enable you to grow firm in power with regard to your inner self, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and that, planted in love and built on love...” (Ep 3:14-17)

This is the mystery we have been called to and that we have to fulfil: to make of Christ the heart of the world. God the Father calls us creatures to these heights; the Holy Spirit supports our commitment to give witness to this fullness as well as to share it with others by our own vocation.

This call comes from God’s free love: when we experience that we have been saved and called out of grace, we realize that – as we have freely received – we have to freely give; and that the gift we have received is not for our own benefit only, but also for the benefit of that world which the Lord Jesus loved and saved, for the benefit of that very world which He did not come to condemn but to save.

Our own Institute was started in 1959. From its very beginning, the Servants of Mary provided inspiration for it. Exactly as the Servants, we have but one desire:

“To make present in the history of salvation the active and silent presence of the Mother of Jesus who, ‘while leading on earth an ordinary life, full of familiar cares and chores, always managed to be intimately in communion with Her Son and quite outstandingly co-operated in our Saviour’s work.’ (Apostolicam Actuositatem, 4)” (RoL, Prologue)

Of course, to take the Mother of Christ as one’s role model should be the intention of each and every believer: it was Jesus Himself who entrusted His Mother to His beloved disciple, as well as to each and every of His disciples and to all the disciples of His Mother (cf Jn 19:25-27). Mary is our source of inspiration when we choose chastity, poverty and obedience. To fulfil the evangelical counsels while staying in this world and leading the same life as any other man or woman, is a very hard challenge.

Why did we choose the name ‘Regnum Mariae’? Any rational explanation would be incomplete. The name ‘Regnum Mariae’ is a gift from God, of which we have still to find out much. In order to grasp its depth, we should look at it with the eyes of the Holy Spirit. What the Lord wants to make of us sheds light on it. We can see the gift of being ‘joint-heirs of Christ’ and of sharing His glory (cf Rm 8:17) as already fulfilled in the Virgin Mary, the lowly Maid-servant on the Lord, the Queen of Heaven and earth. The Seven Fathers’ love for Mary prompted them to devote themselves to her service, and to regard her as their Lady, and as the most glorious Queen of Heaven (cf *Legenda de Origine*, n° 18).

OUR OWN PRESENCE IN THE WORLD

Our vocation should influence our whole person and all aspects of life. Dealing with our presence in the world as consecrated women, I will quote passages from our Rule of Life.

To be “within the world” requires that we first become more and more aware of the mystery dwelling in our hearts:

“Being aware that thanks to baptism we are new creatures, let us live according to our consecrated secularity, soiling our hands with the temporal realities we are part of, so that they may be ordered to God through Christ.” (n° 46)

According to our Rule, consecrated secularity consists of two different dimensions: inner life and living within the world. The world will profit from our presence only if we are faithful to the gift we have received, and also if we strive to grow in faith towards a new creation. Thanks to this awareness, we will be able to accept our own as well as other people’s shortcomings and find out in them the new strength flowing from Jesus’ cross.

The chapter of our Rule of Life which deals with our ‘life in the world’ starts with Jesus’ very words:

“For this is how God loved the world:
He gave His only Son...
so that through Him the world might be saved.” (Jn 3:16-17)

The Son became flesh and went down to Sheol to get the whole of mankind back, and us too, so that the wounds in our ‘roots’ could be healed by Him and life could start to rule once again, even over the kingdom of death. As thanks to the glorious Cross of Jesus Christ sin, hell and death have been vanquished, we can “stand near an infinite number of crosses” (ie, alleviate any kind of sufferings).

Driven by Christ’s love and free from defence mechanisms and prejudices, we can welcome others in all simplicity and promptness. (cf RoL, n° 52)

If we live in the world with a new heart, we will be able to see and acknowledge good wherever it may be or whomever it may come from. We will be able to leave room for the presence of the Holy Spirit. We will be able to fight evil with good, that is, with God’s love. We will be able to start new dynamics and to suggest new life-styles. We will be able to bring love where violence reigns. Our love for our brothers and sisters will come from the personal experience to be loved.

As we focus on ‘the world’, we should be careful not to let the negative mechanisms of our everyday life ‘come into operation’. Our Rule of Life addresses each of us and prompts us to act thus:

“You shall draw your inspiration from the service that Mary rendered and still renders to the world; you shall work in all peace, with no anxiety, which is typical of those who do confide in their own efforts.” (RoL, n° 47)

Nowadays the risk is exactly to be too focussed on ‘doing things’ as well as on ‘having material goods’. We believe that the more we have, the better we are. Economics makes us believe that somebody’s worth is directly proportional to what he owns, not to what he is.

Our own consecration in the world should be imbued with prophetic spirit. As we are part of the world through our ‘secular consecration’, we should try – as far as we can – to establish a dialogue with the different cultures we come across. We should learn to prophetically discern in them what is in conformity with the Gospel, and to carry it out, while firmly believing that God is leading mankind and human history towards its fulfilment in the Kingdom of God. (cf RoL, n° 62)

Consequently, we should always invoke the Holy Spirit, for Him to lead us to true discernment, especially in these hard times.

In the mystery of the Church, we should be attentive to the voice of those the Holy Spirit has made the Church’s guardians. “Each of us will lovingly live in the mystery of the Church, so that our example may be conducive to the ever new relationship of the Church to the world.” (RoL, n° 5)

As far as the ecclesial dimension is concerned, Regnum Mariae should help us grow in the awareness that we share in Christ’s one, prophetic and royal priesthood, and therefore, “we should constantly be attentive to the mission of those who have been called to exercise the ministerial priesthood in the Church. We should co-operate in their mission by our prayer as well as by any other means the Church might show us – provided that these are in agreement with our vocation to consecrated secularity.” (RoL, n° 6)

We should take care that people do not mistake secular consecration for religious consecration... Not always the lay faithful’s position within the Church and their proper mission are correctly understood and welcomed...

THE SIGNS OF OUR PRESENCE IN THE WORLD

Our consent to God’s call is manifested by the three vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. They are a sign of extreme poverty. God calls us to put our whole trust in Him, as well as to make room for Him. The task of any consecrated man or woman is first of all to respond to God’s call, thoroughly entrusting himself / herself to Him, and letting Him strip our selves of everything, so that His love may find a place in our heart and life, and become visible.

The ‘secular’ manner of living up to the vows is common to all kinds of consecration in the Church.

The first sign of consecration is Chastity. Our Rule of Life states:

“Consecrated chastity, voluntarily undertaken for the sake of the Kingdom, is a gift that God is offering to His Church through us. By His grace, in a mysterious way, we become a special sign of the world to come and a call for all people to live waiting for the Lord’s return.” (RoL, n° 8)

We are aware that in our society the value of chastity is not recognized. In fact, we believe that, when we silently annunciate Christ, we will be able to help Him see the light in our brothers’ and sisters’ hearts. We will be for them a haven where God never stops reconciling them to Himself, in order for them to have a share in His glory. (cf RoL, n° 11)

Chastity implies an intimate communion with the Lord: we should experience that it is He that makes of me a 'virgin' when He takes flesh in my depths, taking upon Himself my emptiness, and dwelling in my person and in my life.

The second sign of consecration is Poverty. Our Rule of Life states:

“We have to voluntarily embrace poverty, so that we may follow Christ. You shall rely on God, like Christ did: for love’s sake He became poor, and He always gave way wholeheartedly to the will of His Father.” (RoL, n° 14)

Evangelical poverty is conducive to trust in the Lord: we become able to give Him our own poverty, so that He may turn it into wealth. ‘Consecrated poverty in the world’ is not made visible through definite and specific signs, as religious poverty is. It is a silent witness that should let people catch a glimpse of our great reliance on the paternal providence of God, our sense of detachment from material goods, our gratitude for whatever we may receive from God and from our brothers and sisters, our happiness about the gifts others have received, our acknowledgement and acceptance of our shortcomings and limitations, our experience of the same hardships and difficulties which are man’s common lot, our sharing the gifts we have received (cf RoL, nn° 16-18). A very important aspect of this poverty is the trust we should put in God the Father as Christ did, by debasing Himself and, “although He was rich, becoming poor for our sake, so that we should become rich through His poverty.” (2 Co 8:9)

Last but not least, Obedience. We do experience that obedience is the way to freedom, which is a gift from God. The Rule states:

“By making the will of the Father your own, you will fulfil your union with Him, thus walking towards perfect freedom.” (RoL, n° 21)

Our secular obedience becomes real when we lovingly welcome, day after day, the various situations of life, as well as when we responsibly co-operate in the life of our family, and of our civil as well as ecclesial community (cf n° 23). Obedience means also committing ourselves to carry out with faith and love the Rule of Life, the resolutions of the Assembly and of the Central Council, the guidelines of the Group’s Leaders as well as whatever might be decided by our fraternal meetings. Thus, we will effectively contribute to the up-building of that unity willed by Christ Himself. (cf n° 24)

We are aware that obedience is not definitely one of the values of our society: most people are frightened of it, as they think that they would lose their freedom. In fact, through our secular obedience, we ‘proclaim’ that obedience is a gift to be welcomed constantly and everyday, enabling us to keep in touch with and face reality, as well as all of life’s events, and to do the will of God. When the will of God seems to be difficult to understand, it must be “kept in our heart” until we gain full understanding of it and are ready to do it like “Mary, the faithful maidservant of the Lord, did by being open to and accepting the will of God, thus conceiving and giving birth to Christ. Throughout her whole life, she co-operated in His work of love and redemption.” (RoL, n° 26)

Now I will deal with the other signs of our secular presence in the world, and especially with those our Rule of Life focuses on.

Prayer-work. We should be careful to have the right attitude of mind and spirit when we work and pray, in order for prayer to express the redemptive love of God.

“You shall carry out everything in the name of the Lord Jesus. It is by sharing in His priesthood, that your life may become prayer and praise to the Father.” (RoL, n° 29)

“You shall turn your work into a liturgy, in the awareness that even the humblest of services has a redemptive value for your brothers and sisters, and also that it is worship and praise of God. You shall commit yourself responsibly to your professional activity and also regard the thorough fulfilment of any deriving duties as your first apostolate.” (RoL, n° 48)

Through our secular professional activities we take part in a plurality of jobs and professions, either humble or qualified, related to either the family, or trade, or teaching, or politics and so on.

“You shall do that in order to have an ever more thorough and prompt share in God’s redemptive plan, fulfilling itself in the ever changing human history.” (RoL, n° 50)

The option for the poor. The Church’s ‘option for the poor’ is her faithful response to her Lord. Our own consecration in the world is an additional reason to march with the poor towards freedom, as the Rule demands:

“You shall hold dearer all those that you can recognize as very poor, and be at their side in the laborious march towards freedom.” (RoL, n° 52)

To be at the poor’s side is not a ‘concession’ to what in our view is deemed to be a duty. In fact, it derives from the fact that the poor are our brothers and sisters. It may help us grow in the awareness that man’s selfishness is the root of all kinds of poverty; it may make us feel the need to be at our poor brothers and sisters’ side, so that they may get in their turn what they have been deprived of, as well as their dignity.

Friendship. Generally speaking, friendship is regarded as one of the most important values, a highly appreciated value, something that has to be pursued.

We regard it as God’s gift. “You shall welcome it joyfully as a mutual enrichment, and use it so that others may partake in our fraternity.” (RoL, n° 53)

The universal fraternity we experience makes us see how important it is to be unarmed. In today’s climate of suspicion and mistrust, it is vital that we live up to what this gift from the Holy Spirit is urging us to do: to believe in man’s goodness; to realize that the Spirit is present in the world and to let Him work.

Through our consecration in the world, from our renewed hearts, this new way of living up to friendship will spread into the world.

In addition to that, friendship is one of the main features of the Servitan identity. We would like to live in a spirit of fraternity and unity as our First Fathers did, not only with our Servitan brothers and sisters, but also with everybody the Lord makes us meet, so that we may bring them our new life, and discover new reasons for life. The *Legenda de Origine* thus describes our First Fathers’ friendship:

“There are clear indications that in establishing our order, they were united in perfect loving friendship, for such friendship drew them to agree completely with each other in good will and love on every issue both human and divine, which is what pleases God. They

could not bear being away from each other, separated for even an hour, without feeling quite uneasy.” (n° 29; p. 229)

This way of expressing one’s friendship may seem naïve. In fact, if we grasp its spirit, it will prompt us to go beyond mere formalism, while welcoming in all simplicity God’s gifts in our brothers and sisters.

CONCLUSIONS

Our presence in the world and the signs of our secular consecration, according to the spirituality of the secular institute *Regnum Mariae* living in communion with the Servants of Mary, may help us fulfil the plan of salvation and love God holds in store for us, both as individuals and consecrated family, and commit ourselves to give witness to Christ’s presence in history through our specific secular features. St Paul’s words to the Christians living in Ephesus should sound like both an order and an encouragement to us, *Regnum Mariae*’s sisters, and also to all those who share the Servitan spirituality:

“Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, with all God’s holy people you will have the strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth; so that, knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond knowledge, you may be filled with the utter fullness of God. Glory be to Him whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine; glory be to Him from generation to generation in the Church and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.” (Ep 3:17-21)