



USCSI  
United States Conference  
of Secular Institutes

## **...in this world...**

The first time I cheated, I was an eight-year-old child sitting in a summer school religion class. The School Sisters of Notre Dame came to our little Upper Michigan parish for two weeks each summer. I had never seen “a nun” before and her magnificent veil filled me with holy awe. When those kind eyes searched our faces for an answer to her question – and the room seemed forever silent – I softly slid open the drawer of the high school size desk, my feet dangling below. My catechism lay there and I knew it was open to just that page. I had been trying at the last minute to memorize those very first questions and answers. It was such an important question. Someone had to try! I raised my hand and answered into that awful explosive silence.

Suddenly, I knew she knew, and still today I feel the hot flush of shame. Her eyes were kind, and as she spoke – gently, warmly – and moved in my direction to look over my shoulder, she asked us never to forget this answer for the rest of our lives. She put her finger on the page and then just as softly closed my desk drawer – looking at me from out of that huge veil with nothing but gentle love.

From that moment on I knew two things: No, I will never forget the question or the answer, and yes, I will be a “one of them” someday. It was all so overwhelming! *There is a God and he loves us!* He is the reason for our existence. We are meant to be happy forever. There are people whose love must be like his!

The question? The elder among us know already and can sing-song it in parody.

“Who made us?” “God made you.” “What for?” “To know him, to love him, and to serve him in this world, and to be happy with him forever in heaven.” “What does *serve* mean?” “To work for someone and try to please him because you love him.”

*Saint Joseph Baltimore Catechism*

And this is the marvelous thing! Jesus Christ came *into this world*. He came, he called, he continues to call. Vocation!

Tracing the history of *call* since Christ became flesh and lived among us and since the apostles responded puts *this world* and our Catholic Church in harmonious perspective. Baptism is the first call. It makes us attentive, open, *able* to follow Jesus Christ and his purposes. Jesus called and nets were left on the beach. They came: tax adjuster and fisherman, Martha, Mary, the woman with an alabaster jar at the party, and the rich young man in the shadows of night. Some stayed, some went away sadly.

The centuries of the Church repeat the call. From its roots, the Church has always had deacons who ministered to the poor and those who assisted the deacons. There were Lydia(s) dyeing fine purple cloth at riversides, Anthonys retreating to the

deserts, Augustines weeping in gardens while reading the Lord's word, and hearing the eloquence of teachers and mentors, widows who assembled in prayer and began to gather in communal life, and – always – servants of the servants in sacerdotal service. As time went on, there were Benedicts who called for stability, set down rules for close living, established houses of prayer and cultural enrichment. These monasteries, abbeys, convents, -- whatever name and rank they are given -- became the centers of cities and villages throughout Europe, and far beyond, establishing a Christian culture *in this world*. Many universities developed from cathedral schools staffed by clerics and various orders of teachers and preachers; providing food for the poor was often part of cathedral ritual -- *if* the poor would gather to pray! Hospice care is as old as the Church and countless forms of consecrated life developed through the centuries to minister to the ill and dying. In time and in the dispersment of the peoples the Church has recognized the gifts of those specially called to serve its primary task: to know God, to love, him, and to serve him *in this world*.

Even *leaving the world* in its symbolic sense has always been for the sake of the world. When a Poor Clare commits herself never to leave the ten acres of her abbey, she does so not to flee, but to find!

Today, when a person senses a *call* to turn fully to Jesus Christ, to serve him, to love him, the options are overwhelming! There are *hundreds* of orders, congregations, religious communities, and associations of the faithful from which to select. People today are mobile. Young men who wish to be priests even *shop* for a diocese to suit their sense of ideal church. Families may take the shortest route to church, or may drive miles for the liturgical style of their choice.

How to decide? What is *my* call? Am I to be married, single, a priest, a brother, a sister? Must I leave everything behind? Will I walk alone, or will others walk with me? What about the here and now?

Experiences of those serving vocation ministry show that young people are generally not attracted by an *idea* of belonging, but to *persons* who belong. Older persons searching for like-minded believers may first be attracted by literature and ads, but they, too, search for the testimony of the radically devoted life.

*If I am called, as you seem to think I am, then show me by your own lifestyle and service! Have you really made a difference? Do you live differently than Aunt Gladys? She's alone. She loves the Church. Show me.*

*Letter of a nineteen-year-old girl*

In 1947, Pope Pius XII established another form of committed life and lifestyle for the Catholic Church. This form of consecrated life was given the title, secular institute. *Secular* seems to smack in opposition to *sacred*. Not so! The word derives from Latin and basically means *the present world*. Secular institutes continue in the long line our Church's tradition that some among the faithful are *called, consecrated*, set aside in commitment to follow Jesus radically twenty-four hours of every day. The point of secular institutes is to *consecrate* the present world to Christ *from within the world* and to establish his reign through lives lived for him chastely, simply, and obediently.

Again, defining *consecrate* in church terms means to be totally dedicated to God, usually in a specific form. Quoting Church law, the catechism devotes a section to secular institutes:

A secular institute is an institute 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. (*CIC, Can 710*)

By a “life perfectly and entirely consecrated to [such] sanctification,” the members of these institutes share in the Church’s task of evangelization, “in the world and from within the world,” where their presence acts as “leaven in the world.” (*Pius XII, Provida Mater, cf. PC 11*) “Their witness of a Christian’s life” aims “to order temporal things according to God and inform the world with the power of the gospel.” They commit themselves to the evangelical counsels by sacred bonds and observe among themselves the communion and fellowship appropriate to their “particular secular way of life.” (*cf. CIC, Can. 713,2*)

The state of consecrated life is...one way of experiencing a “more intimate” consecration, rooted in Baptism and dedicated totally to God. In the consecrated life, Christ’s faithful, moved by the Holy Spirit, propose to follow Christ more nearly, to give themselves to God who is love above all and, pursuing the perfection of charity in the service of the Kingdom, to signify and proclaim in the Church the glory of the world to come. (*CCC 916*)

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In the Church, which is like the sacrament – the sign and instrument – of God’s own life, the consecrated life is seen as a special sign of the mystery of redemption. To follow and imitate Christ more nearly and to manifest more clearly his self-emptying is to be more deeply present to one’s contemporaries, in the heart of Christ. For those who are on this “narrower” path encourage their brethren by their example, and bear striking witness “that the world cannot be transfigured and offered to God without the spirit of the Beatitudes.” (*LG 31,2; CCC 932*)

*So, what’s the big deal! I see nuns and priests in all sorts of service. Here in the USA, they run around doing the things everybody else does, and they do them for Christ. I don’t see what makes you different.*

*Brother-in-law of the author*

Consecrated life in the United States and Canada indeed has taken on many secular – *in this world* – forms. Many live alone, as do most members of secular institutes; many work in jobs that aren’t directly church related; as do the majority of members of secular institutes. The question is justified and may not be answered with a

glib: They do this and we do that; we live this way and they live that way – or, one that drives me up a wall! – religious have more rules than members of secular institutes. None of the above truly define secular institutes.

Certainly, *exterior form* had something to do with the creation of secular institutes, but the great founders of the 20th century would be hard put to agree with that reasoning. Nevertheless, let's take a look at *exterior forms*! Groups with a common purpose as far back as the Middle Ages wore distinctive garb according to professions. This is a prominent feature in society today – everything from MacDonald's aprons to surgical scrubs. Priestly and religious life as it was expressed exteriorly from the 18<sup>th</sup> - 20<sup>th</sup> centuries looked quite different than it does today. Dress for both men and women was different then, yet each generation had its *wealthy* or *fancy* style in contrast to its *poorer* or *simpler* style.

In religious life at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the identifying feature was often this simple communal style that became recognized as a distinctive habit. For some communities, including brand newly founded religious, the distinctive dress is the sign of commitment. There is a lovely old book written by the famous Bishop Sheen giving his nephew a tour of Rome. He describes the colleges of Rome by the identifying clerical outfit of the community or the country running the college. These outer symbols were beloved, and they expressed commitment to a way of life. As time went on, some communities recalled that their habit actually had been the simple dress of the time in which they were founded. For them, contemporary dress would suit their apostolic purpose well. No matter what the *outer form*, all will agree that the *inner*, the spiritual life is the first priority.

There were and are many forms – each with its own good and even sacred reasons that must be remembered with respect and understanding, particularly in their cultural context. There is an old saying: The *spirit* creates a *form*; the form can either protect or destroy the spirit. Many forms that we once knew are long forgotten. An example: I grew up on a small farm. In addition to the farmwork, my father was employed "in town" sixteen miles away. When I reached sixth grade, he took two of us along to town so we could attend Catholic grade school for about a year. My mother insistently invited the Sisters to stop by the farm someday. Low and behold, they did, unannounced, on a once-a-year outing day. Mom was thrilled, but she also panicked. She wanted to feed them, offer them something to drink, make them welcome into her not-cleaned-up-for-the-visit home. Sister superior confided in her: No, our rule doesn't permit us to enter your home or to eat with you... Mom was thoroughly embarrassed and didn't know how to show hospitality. Nevertheless, my family was honored beyond measure that Sisters had stopped at our farm. True, much of this has changed! Rightly or wrongly, in the name of Vatican II, *the world* and adapting to it became a priority. Sisters *entered into the world* like never before.

Secular institutes were founded *prior* to Vatican II, during the time when consecrated Brothers and Sisters seemed to be *set apart* from the world. The *forms* of life for Sisters and Brothers were highly governed by church law, which set up protective restrictions regarding the consecrated life and its lifestyles. Most founders of secular institutes had the longing for the freedom of the Spirit to move *within* the people of God, not separate, not having *left the world behind*, not tied down with land and buildings or a

multitude of forms – as precious and needed as these are for Church work. The *focus* of consecrated seculars is *this world*, the here and now of one's profession, parish, neighborhood, relatives, and associates. In a pluralistic world so far from Christian values, there needed to be a way to bring Christ in every thinkable way to every thinkable person and place. As sometimes said regarding the spirit of the council: Formerly, the Church expected the people to come to her; now the Church must find ways to go to the people.

Each secular institute finds its own style, its own terminology, for this focus. For Father Joseph Kentenich, founder of six Schoenstatt secular institutes, the binding element is *covenant*. As he expressed numerous times, it is our task to live our baptismal covenant with God and all the saints no matter who or where we are; we must help one another to live this covenant reality. It is a covenant of love. Father Joseph-Marie Perrin, founder of Caritas Christi, phrased it this way: Members are “to form and give to the Church contemplative apostolic laywomen who, in every condition of life, strive to live as dedicated Christians by loving God and making him loved where he has placed them in the midst of the world.”

Each secular institute has been approved by the Church, either on a diocesan or a pontifical level. Each has a structured formation program that helps in the development of the spiritual life. A support system is effected through regular contacts with other members in addition to monthly days of recollection and the yearly retreat.

Members of secular institutes work in or are retired from every imaginable profession: office workers, managers, volunteers, doctors, social workers, educators, nurses, laborers, administrative assistants, lawyers, computer programmers, and the list is as unique as society itself with its multifaceted face. Most live in their own residence; others in small communal settings. Most dress in attire similar to their colleagues and provide for their own livelihood, retirement, and health needs. A few secular institutes have uniform dress and mutual work projects.

Individual members find the strength and courage to live fully their unique vocation in a life nurtured by the spirituality of their institute, daily prayer, meditation, and Eucharistic liturgy. They are to be *salt* and *leaven* in the biblical sense, whether known or unknown. As Father John Puntino of the secular institute of Don Bosco Volunteers writes, “They seek to infuse Gospel values in whatever field of work they choose or in whatever way they volunteer to be of service to others.”

In 2002, the Third Continental Congress on Vocations to Ordained Ministry and Consecrated Life in North America convened in Montreal. The congress was held at the invitation of Pope John Paul II. The bishops' conferences continue to work with the dioceses to establish a pastoral plan to foster a *vocation culture* in North America. At the conference Reverend Gilles Routhier spoke of a need to renew our sense of mission as Church. He stated,

To speak of a vocational call requires a somewhat defined missionary project, implicitly referring to a given place and time. If this is not done, the risk is of being so intangible that no one is reached. ... [If we are to] “create a favorable climate for vocations in the North American Church,” we must not be content to think up

a communication project, no matter how ambitious or clever it may be. Nor must we simply see implementing new means of recruitment and calling forth even though they be the most modern, attracting, or efficient. That may be important, but to take refuge in techniques seems to me frankly, to be insufficient. Each Church must find an inspirational guiding image for a missionary project. This means beginning to concretize and put in place testing grounds for imagining a new Gospel venture in present-day society.

Members of secular institutes seek to implement this missionary project every day in the given place and time of their niche in society. The call to know God, to love and serve *in this world* remains ever fresh in countless committed ways. Secular institutes are a way. As Pope John Paul II declared: "The secular institutes constitute a meaningful reality. The Church needs them in order to create an apostolate of profound Christian witness in the most varied areas, *"which can help to change the world from within, by becoming the life-giving leaven."* I pray to the Lord that many may listen to his voice and follow him on this path. I beg you to remain faithful to your personal vocation, as it is "characterized and unified by consecration, the apostolate, and secular life." (Madrid, 1982).

There are currently thirty institutes in the United States and five associations of the faithful aspiring to be recognized as such. If you would like information or speakers on consecrated seculars, please turn to the resources below.

For articles and brief information on each institute, see United States Conference of Secular Institutes (USCSI): [www.secularinstitutes.org](http://www.secularinstitutes.org). Regarding a perspective on secular institutes from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, see: [www.nccbuscc.org/consecratedlife/qa.htm](http://www.nccbuscc.org/consecratedlife/qa.htm).

For articles and information from the continental congress on vocation held in Montreal, April 18-21, 2002, see: [www.usccb.org/vocations/3rdcontinental.htm](http://www.usccb.org/vocations/3rdcontinental.htm)

For prayerful reading: *The Private Prayers of Pope John Paul II: Words of Inspiration*, Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1994. Words addressed by the pope to members of secular institutes.

## Father George Hazler - A Vocation Evolution



It was 1957 when I found the courage to respond to the "call" and the perfect fit for me seemed to be the religious congregation which always attracted me and one with which I was familiar. However, in those days the direction provided by the local parish priest was interpreted as the *word of God* and so I had no choice but to become a diocesan priest and "be like the priests of my home parish" as I was told. And so after ordination I was a diocesan priest for five years.

But the desire and the *call* to join my favorite religious congregation persisted and with the permission and encouragement of the bishop, I entered the novitiate and served in that community for approximately 17 happy years. But we all know God works in strange and varied ways and the road at times has detours and speed bumps.

It was then that I met a priest who was a member of a secular institute and after one year of prayer and discernment, I knew that this is where God had been calling me from the very beginning – consecrated life in a secular institute. (I had never heard of secular institutes but knew immediately that this is where I belonged.)

This change has made all the difference in the world – no pun intended. In my life of secular consecration I am able to use the gifts and talents God has given me. Without the burden attached to the ownership of corporate property or community sponsored ministries which have to be “filled,” members of secular institutes, with the approval of their superiors, can pursue church-related ministries with a greater flexibility but also profound accountability. With consecrated seculars living and working *in the world* the gospel is lived in a very refreshing manner.

And so with nearly 26 years of ministry in health care, I presently serve as the Vice President of Leadership Formation for the Daughters of Charity Health System, Los Altos Hills, CA. In this capacity as a priest I am responsible to assist the leaders of this health system and its member hospitals to deepen their spiritual life regardless of faith tradition so that they can more effectively continue the healing ministry of Jesus Christ. Through retreats and conferences I can assist and animate the administrative teams, directors, managers and supervisors to renew themselves in living out the mission and charism of the sponsors, in other words addressing the soul dimension of each individual and thus the soul of the organization.

## **Pat Skarda - Expressive, dramatic, convinced.**



Expressive, dramatic, convinced. Perhaps it's the legacy of being a college professor. Pat Skarda found her special niche in total commitment to the Church through the spirituality of Caritas Christi, currently one of the world's largest secular institutes.

There is no denying her catholicity. Skarda tells her story tongue-in-cheek or foot-in-mouth as time and again colleagues smile patronizingly and either turn away or join her in a venture of prayer and service. Her commitment to the Church evokes the memory of a St. Paul brandishing a two-edged sword for the truth of Christ that cuts to the heart. Her strength and her academic field is English literature – “And,” as Skarda quips, “the Bible in translation is English literature at its best.”

As she tells it, on her journey to find her niche, her parish involvement teeter-tottered with one activity after another. Even prayer and study groups fell apart after while. She hungered for deeper exchange, solid commitment – community equally

intense about God's presence in the here-and-now world. "Consecrated seculars" is a large phrase in her vocabulary and she never tires in the telling.

Caritas Christi is a secular institute founded by a Dominican, Joseph-Marie Perrin (1905-2002). These vowed laywomen strive in every imaginable condition of life to love God and make him loved "wherever he has placed them in the world." With zeal and energy Skarda and the women of her institute will do what they can wherever they are to kindle love for Christ and find creative ways to serve him. Skarda's enthusiasm for her vocation has led to appointments in the Church's promotion of vocations to the consecrated life on national and international levels. She was called upon to write the working document (*Instrumentum Laboris*) for the Third Continental Congress on Vocations to the Ordained Ministry and Consecrated Life in North America that took place in Montreal in 2002, and today she represents secular institutes on the Bishops' Committee on Vocations.

Skarda relates, "One day after Mass an extraordinary woman of deep faith stopped me and handed me a brochure. 'I have something you might love,' she said, adding that she had prayed about doing this for three years. The brochures described a new vocation in the Catholic Church, that of a secular institute, Caritas Christi. I read it and dashed off a letter to the national priest assistant, and in no time at all I met a group of women from every walk of life who put God first in their lives, lives powerful and interesting and lived in the midst of the world. As I listened to them and their particular apostolates in their own individual providential circumstances, I thought only of the goodness of God for letting me in on this secret of my Church. I drove over three hundred miles just to be with them a second time, racing against the clock so as not to miss a minute of their monthly gathering enriched with conferences given by a Jesuit priest who had been with them for over twenty years. I missed their dinner at a Portuguese restaurant in Rhode Island, so I bought myself a hamburger and arrived at Mercy Lodge, wondering if being late ruined my candidacy. Much to my surprise, as we talked about my rush to be with them I felt very much at home among these women and at home with my God in a community I have come to love."

## **Angelita Pedro - They call her angel.**

They call her angel. Newly retired, she was a nurse at a county facility that provides care for the severely depressed. She continues to volunteer her nursing skills to shut-ins and wherever she finds a need. The stress of the ill for whom she cares weighs heavily on her shoulders and in her heart. It is the face of Christ she sees in each one. At her daily Mass she sees each of her patients' broken hearts and their hopeless darkness in the host lifted up and broken.

Angelita Pedro came from the Philippines to join the Schoenstatt Sisters of Mary, a secular institute founded to be primarily at the service of the Schoenstatt Movement. "I was drawn by the Marian charism," she tells. "As Mary and in my profession I can serve at the side of the Savior. Identifying with Mary's journey is precious to my people. I can think of no better way to love Christ than to be Mary today."

For Pedro, journeying with Mary means to be motivated by love, to try to do the little things of everyday life extraordinarily well. Prayer, chores, flower beds, care of others, personal care done like Mary might have done – transfigured by God’s grace through human cooperation. “My institute is part of the Schoenstatt Movement. We Sisters see ourselves as a bridge between the laity and religious. We were founded in 1926. When the Church officially established secular institutes, we were among the first to be approved. Like our name, Schoenstatt – which means a beautiful place and takes its name from the place where we were founded in Germany – we do our best to make this world as beautiful as possible. That starts with Christ’s kindness, for he wants to use our hands and hearts. Mary knows this best. We learn from her. Look at Cana! She is our teacher in pointing the way to him.”

Where is Pedro in her off hours? “I take the pressures of my profession to Mary’s shrine at our International Schoenstatt Center near Waukesha, Wisconsin. Yes, of course I pray! Lots! But my prayer is the child’s plea for the misery of the people as I lift my wheelbarrow and plant next spring’s surprises. Maybe someone will praise our heavenly Father for the beauty of his lilies.”

## **Words from a Pastor**

*Paragraphs below are extracted from an article by Brian J. Lowney, “Experiences Lead to Vocation,” in 2002 World Day for Consecrated Life, p. 55f.*

Father John Dowd, OSM, pastor of Assumption Church in Chicago, Illinois, tells about Tom. A friend of a friend died. One evening my friend told me a little about his friend’s life and death. When he finished, he asked me a question, “What is a secular institute?”

There was, my friend told me, nothing really extraordinary in Tom’s life. As a young man he had married, but his wife died in an accident less than two years after they were married – she fell from a short ladder while hanging a curtain in their apartment; her head hit a radiator. There were no children, and Tom never married again. His family and friends wished he would but he didn’t. He was sixty-three when he died after a short and relatively painless bout with cancer.

Tom worked for over thirty years as a salesman for a company that made one-of-a-kind precision tools. He traveled around the country and was gone about half the time. When he was home and not working he gave a lot of time to his family – his parents, brothers and a sister, nieces and nephews. He was everybody’s favorite in-law and uncle.

At the funeral Mass one of his brothers gave a short and surprising eulogy. He said that what everybody really loved about Tom was his way of always being positive and encouraging. He made no claim to any special wisdom. He didn’t give advice and didn’t make judgments. But he always had an encouraging word for whatever was going well. ... Any bad news he heard, he just buried, never passing on a wounding rumor. He also gave a good deal of money to his brothers and sister to help with their kids’ education. His own life was rather simple and unencumbered.

At the end of the eulogy his brother said that it was only on the day Tom died that the family learned from a letter he left behind that he had been a lifelong member of a secular institute.

## QUOTES

Consecrated persons—monks and nuns, contemplatives, religious dedicated to the works of the apostolate, members of Secular Institutes and Societies of Apostolic life, hermits and consecrated virgins—truly deserve the gratitude of the ecclesial community. Their existence witnesses to their love for Christ as they walk the path proposed in the Gospel and with deep joy commit themselves to the same style of life which he chose for himself. This praiseworthy fidelity, while not seeking any other approval than that of the Lord, “also becomes *a living memorial of Jesus' way of living and acting* as the Incarnate Word in relation to the Father and in relation to the brethren”. (5)

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Members of Secular Institutes, like consecrated virgins in the world, offer to God the joys and sorrows, the hopes and petitions of all people and contemplate the face of Christ which they recognize in the faces of their brothers and sisters, in the historical events, in the apostolate and in everyday work. (25)

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The experience of communion among consecrated persons results in an even greater openness to all other members of the Church. The command to love one another experienced in the internal life of the community must be transferred from the personal level to that of the different ecclesial realities. Only in an integrated ecclesiology, wherein the various vocations are gathered together as the one people of God, can the vocation to consecrated life once again find its specific identity as sign and witness. (31)

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A life transformed by the evangelical counsels becomes a prophetic and silent witness and at the same time an eloquent protest against an inhuman world. It calls for the promotion of the individual and for a new *creativity of charity*. We have seen it in the holy founders. It is manifested not only in the effectiveness of their service but especially in their ability to identify with those who suffer in such a way that the helping hand is experienced as heartfelt sharing. This kind of evangelization, realized through works characterized by love and dedication, ensures an unmistakable efficacy to the charity of words. (33)

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Throughout the centuries, works of charity have always provided the ambient for the concrete living out of the Gospel. In the practice of charity, consecrated persons have emphasized the prophetic nature of their charism and the richness of their spirituality in the Church and in the world. They recognized that they were called to be the “manifestation of God's love in the world.” (36)

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Many traditional and new foundations bring consecrated men and women to places where others usually cannot go. In recent years consecrated persons were able to leave the security of *the known* to thrust themselves into unknown places and works. Thanks to their total consecration they are in fact free to step in wherever there are critical needs. (36)

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Today there is a greater freedom in the exercise of the apostolates, a flourishing with greater awareness, a solidarity expressed through knowing how to stand with the people, assuming their problems, in order to respond to them, paying close attention to the signs of the times and to their needs. (36)

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“Sentinels of the Dawn”: young men and women are also found among consecrated persons. We truly need courageous young people who, allowing themselves to be configured by the Father with the work of the Spirit and becoming “persons conformed to Christ”, offer to all a joyful and transparent witness of their “specific acceptance of the mystery of Christ” and of the particular spirituality of their own Institute. (46)

***Starting Afresh From Christ:  
A Renewed Commitment To Consecrated Life  
In The Third Millennium***

Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life  
and Societies of Apostolic Life

May 19, 2002