

**POPE PIUS XII
TO THE CONVENTION
OF ALL RELIGIOUS**

**December 8, 1950
in Rome**



*Translated by the
Monks of St. Meinrad Archabbey*

A GRAIL PUBLICATION

St. Meinrad

Indiana

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✠ Paul C. Schult, D. D.
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*ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS, POPE
PIUS XII, DELIVERED ON
DECEMBER 8, 1950, TO THE
CONVENTION OF RELIGIOUS
HELD IN ROME*

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ADDRESS OF POPE PIUS XII

This Holy Year shows by a wonderful series of events how strong is the faith and how rich is the life of Christ's Church, Our Mother. This is due to no merit of Our own but to the great mercy of God which has shown itself more effective for good deeds than any human foresight could anticipate. Among these serious and important events and undertakings your gathering is well timed. Your fraternal assembly, to which we are very happy to direct these affectionate words, is an eminent one.

Indeed, that which in the annals of the Church was never done before is now taking place: all religious groups, which have for their goal in life the highest degree of evangelical perfection, have joined together in the celebrated assemblies we have seen in these days to deliberate seriously and to determine what is necessary for the common good.

In Our opinion the times are ripe for demanding that this be done. There are many reasons that strongly urge your planned discussions and studies: the changed state of affairs which the Church must endure; various

doctrinal points that have become widespread within the Church itself, points, too, that touch on the condition and the state of moral perfection; and finally, the urgent needs of the apostolic labors which you generously and universally undertake.

You are now about to finish your task. Your discussions have seethed with pointed considerations; they have brought forth many and varied proposals; nor will they be less rich, We hope, in the virtues necessary to carry them into effect. The grace of God, your wills cooperating, will stir up these virtues. Indeed, the prayers and works of religious self-denial, yours and especially those of your sisters in Christ, with ardent zeal have called down this grace on the work you are doing.

You ask the paternal Blessing of the Vicar of Christ as a pledge of divine guidance and a protection so that your deliberations may be brought to a fitting close. Before imparting this Blessing We deem it proper to speak to you concerning certain aspects of the religious life which should be made clear, so that this clarification may serve as a norm for your thoughts and your actions.

I.

First of all, it behooves Us to touch on the position that the Religious Orders and Congregations hold in the Church. You know, of course, that Our Redeemer established the Church as a hierarchy. Christ Himself set a definite distinction between the Apostles with their successors, together with their helpers in the ministry, and the simple faithful. Indeed upon these two groups [the clergy and the laity] the structure of the kingdom of God on earth is founded. [By the divine law itself, therefore, has it been decreed that clerics be distinguished from the laity.¹ Between these two groups has been established the religious state, which, flowing from ecclesiastical origin, for this reason exists and for this reason has worth: that it is closely bound up with the proper end of the Church, which is: that men should be led to acquire sanctity. Although every Christian, with the Church as his guide, is bound to scale this sacred height, yet the religious makes his journey thither on a path wholly his own and with safeguards of a higher nature.

¹ Cf. Canon 107.

Further, the religious state is in no way reserved to either of the two groups which are in the Church by divine right since both clerics and laymen can be religious. On the other hand, access to the clerical dignity is open equally to those who are religious and those who are not. In view of these fundamental principles established by Christ for the formation of His Church, that man errs who thinks that the peculiar form of the secular clergy, as secular, was approved and established by Our Divine Redeemer, and that the special form of the regular clergy is secondary and auxiliary—even though good and to be approved—since it flows from the secular clergy. Keeping in mind this order established by Christ, neither branch of the clergy can hold any prerogative by divine authority since that same divine authority prefers neither the one to the other. But what the proper field of each is, what their mutual relations are, and what work should be assigned to each in bringing about the salvation of men, all these Christ has left for determination to the vicissitudes and needs of the times, or rather, to express Our thought more precisely, Christ has left these matters to the discretion of His Church.

There is no doubt that, by divine decree,

every priest, whether secular or religious, must carry out his duties in such a way as to be a helper of and subject to his bishop. This divine decree, which, for the rest, has always been present in ecclesiastical tradition, now finds clear expression in the Code of Canon Law where one finds the legislation on religious who are pastors or local ordinaries.² Furthermore, it is no rare thing for the entire clergy, including the bishop, of certain missionary territories to be religious. Let no one think that such a condition is altogether extraordinary or unaccustomed, or that it is only temporary, or that, as soon as possible, this sacred charge should be entrusted to the secular clergy.

The exemption that Religious Orders enjoy derogates in no way from the principles divinely given in the foundation of the Church, nor is this exemption in any way contrary to the law that a priest must obey his bishop. Exempt religious, according to the norms given in Canon Law, are under the authority of the bishop in so far as the carrying out of his episcopal office and the proper governing of souls require it. In passing, it should be noted that, in the discussions concerning exemption that

² Cf. Canons 626 to 631 and Canon 454, par. 5.

have taken place during the last few decades, it has perhaps not been sufficiently adverted to that exempt religious by the explicit law of the Code are subject always and everywhere to the power of the Roman Pontiff, as to their Supreme Moderator, whom they are bound to obey likewise by reason of their vow of obedience.³ The Supreme Pontiff, of course, has ordinary and immediate jurisdiction not only over the whole Church as such but also over each and every diocese and over every single Christian. In view of these points it is abundantly clear that this fundamental, God-given law, that both the clergy and the laity must be subject to the rule of the bishop, has been obeyed enough and more than enough, and this holds also for exempt religious. Both the religious and the secular clergy show an equal zeal in obeying the will and command of Christ.

II.

In this discussion there is another closely related point which we have at heart to explain more fully. It is the question of the way in which a cleric and a religious must strive after the perfection of their state.

³ Cf. Canon 499, par. 1.

It is contrary to the truth to declare that the clerical state, as such and as ordained by divine decree, by its very nature, or at least by a certain necessity of its nature, demands that the evangelical counsels should be observed by its members and therefore that it must or can be called a state of evangelical perfection (which must be acquired). A cleric, therefore, is not bound by divine law to the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience; and certainly he is not bound in the same way and for the same reason by which this obligation arises when one embraces the religious state, that is, by the public taking of vows. This, of course, does not prevent a cleric from taking on these bonds of the vows privately and of his own accord. The fact that priests of the Latin rite are bound to observe sacred celibacy neither takes away nor lessens the distinction between the clerical and the religious state. The religious cleric, not as a cleric but as a religious, publicly professes the state and condition of evangelical perfection.

If We, by the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia*, have declared that that form of life, which the Secular Institutes follow, must be considered and publicly acknowledged as a state of evangelical perfection, since their mem-

bers are bound in some way to observe the evangelical counsels, this fact in no way contradicts what We have just said. There is certainly nothing to prevent clerics from uniting together in Secular Institutes in order that by their choice of this way of life they may seek the state of evangelical perfection, but in that case they are truly in the state of acquiring perfection, not because they are clerics but because they are members of the Secular Institute. This kind of an Institute has indeed as its whole reason for existence the evangelical counsels, which are proper to the religious state and in that state are practiced with the highest perfection. But the Secular Institute embraces these counsels in such a way as not to depend on the religious state. It is independent, and in the external form of its life it is not necessarily related to the perfection just mentioned [namely, the practice of the counsels as it is found in the normal religious state].⁴

⁴ Nulla profecto ratio officit, quominus clerici in Saecularia Instituta coalescant ut, ad evangelicae perfectionis statum, huiusmodi vitae delectu et genere, contendant, sed tum ipsi quoque sunt in statu perfectionis acquirendae, non utpote clerici, set utpote Saecularis Instituti gregales. Huiusmodi enim Institutum evangelica consilia, quae, religiosi status propria, ibi summa perfectione in

III.

We deem it opportune to dwell somewhat on this question: What are the reasons that the religious state offers to draw souls to embrace it?

There are those who assert that the religious state by its very nature and by its purpose is nothing else but a safe refuge offered to the weak-hearted and fearful who, since they cannot overcome the hazards of this stormy life and since they neither know nor perhaps care to know how to endure its rigors, slothfully bid goodbye to the world and flee to the haven of a peaceful cloister; their work, these would say, is to develop confidence in the grace of God and in themselves so that those who seek an idle peace may put aside such a mentality and dare to come to the struggles of the common life. Can such a concept be true? If it can be proved in an individual case such proof must not be rejected.

It is, however, not for us now to judge for what motive each one embraces the religious

rem deducuntur, habet sane veluti vitae rationem, cui inhaereat, ita tamen complet, ut e statu regulari non pendeat, sed per se stet in externa vitae forma ad perfectionem nuper memoratam haud necessario pertinente."

life. We wish to give the principal and true reason why one should desire the cloistered life. And this reason is far removed from the reasoning just given, for that reasoning is false and unjust if taken as a universal statement. The intention of entering either the priesthood or the religious life and firm constancy in such an intention demand a generous disposition and a fervent desire of giving up oneself wholly. The history of the Church (which hands down the wonderful deeds of holy men and of religious institutions, narrates the results of their holy endeavors, and gives us their ascetical teachings) and daily experience show most clearly that men and women of unconquerable and generous virtue have flourished no less in religion than in the world. } Finally, what about those religious men and women who labor in spreading the kingdom of the Gospel in new lands, who aid the sick and teach the young and work in the schools? Do these run away from the society of men and turn their wills away from association with men? Do not they rather, for the most part, fight in the very first ranks for the cause of the Church, even as the secular priests and their lay helpers?

We cannot here refrain from pointing out one fact that is directly contrary to the opinion

that the religious life is for weaklings. If the number of those, especially of young women, who wish to enter the enclosed gardens of the religious life, is growing less, too often the reason is that they find it too hard to deny their own will and to give up their freedom, as the vow of obedience by its very nature demands. And some even extol as a lofty form of moral perfection not so much the complete giving up of liberty for the love of Christ but rather a restricted, partial surrender of it. For the formation of a just and holy man this would be their formula: liberty, they say, should be curtailed when necessary, but it should be given free rein as much as possible.

Here We pass over the question as to whether this new foundation, upon which they attempt to build the edifice of holiness, would be as fruitful and as powerful in carrying out and developing the apostolic work of the Church as that ancient rule of obedience, undertaken for the love of Christ, has already proved itself to be by the testimony of fifteen hundred years. For the present it is of very grave importance to consider fully this new ideal so that what is hidden within it may be made clear to all. This new ideal of liberty, when understood as it is, does not in any way grasp the nature of the

evangelical counsel [of obedience] but rather in a certain sense distorts it to an opposite meaning. No one, of course, whether speaking of individuals or of groups, no one, We say, is in duty bound to set before himself the evangelical counsel of perfect obedience, the radical perfection of which is expressed by that form of life in which a man gives up his own will completely. All can, if they wish, conform their lives to this new norm. But words must be understood and accepted as they sound. And, if this new ideal is compared with the vow of obedience, it is found not to be of the same supreme value nor does it express that word and noble example of Holy Scripture: "He humbled himself, becoming obedient to death."⁵

He, therefore, deceives and is mistaken who, when speaking about entering the religious state, would give the advice to seek only this new norm and opinion as the one to be followed and would wrongfully neglect the natural desires of the soul and the whisperings of divine grace. For this reason, whenever God's inviting voice unmistakably calls a soul to the very summit of evangelical perfection, having put aside every hesitation and for the purpose of

⁵ Phil. II, 8.

making possible the realization of his lofty intent, show him that free immolation of his liberty which the vow of obedience demands—that vow, We say, which the Church for so many centuries has thoroughly considered, has made experience of, has clearly defined and approved. | Let no one unwillingly be forced to the desire of giving himself up completely; but if he should wish it, let there be no one to dissuade him, much less hold him back.⁶ ||

IV.

We now wish to say something about external works and the inner life. There are few things

⁶ Fallit et fallitur igitur qui de religioso statu capessendo consilium petendi solummodo illam normam vel opinionem equendam profert atque eius animi proclivitatem et divinae gratiae instinctum perperam negligit. Quocirca, si Dei vocis invitamentum certo indicio aliquem ad evangelicae perfectionis culmen arcessit, qualibet amota haesitatione, celsi huius propositi perficiendi causa, ei proponatur libertatis libera immolatio, prout oboedientiae votum exposcit, votum, inquit, quod Ecclesia per tot saeculorum decursum perpendit, experta est, definivit, comprobavit. Nemo invitatus ad huiusmodi devovendi se studium propellatur; sed si is velit, nemo sit, qui eum dehortetur, nedum detineat.

pertaining to the regular life and to religious life generally and of serious importance that have been treated so extensively as this question. Nevertheless, We wish to present also Our judgment on this point.

It is not by mere chance that the rise and spread of that philosophy which is commonly called "existentialism" should occur in Our days. The men who live today, when events draw them to attempt a solution of difficult metaphysical and religious questions, neglectful of their higher responsibilities, willingly think that it is enough for them to do what here and now must be done. But anyone who professes Our holy faith refuses, because of that faith, to be solicitous only about the passing moment of time and to abandon himself wholly to the river of life. He knows that the things that do not appear⁷ are most to be esteemed, are most true, and shall so continue into the future that they will never fail. But alas, despite warnings and exhortations, even ecclesiastics, religious not excepted, have been affected not a little by this contagion; although they do not deny that which surpasses all human sense and every power of nature, yet they think little of it.

⁷ Cf. Hebr. XI, 1.

Has this danger [of existentialism], so serious and perilous a threat, now been overcome? Let God be thanked that we can reasonably hope for this. That which Our eyes see and that which the experience of life makes clear begets this confidence in Us.

The most laborious zeal and the riches one seeks from the interior life can well be combined. Those two stars, St. Francis Xavier and Saint Teresa of Jesus, who are resplendent examples of the regular life, prove this fact beyond all question.

Energetic activity and zeal for the inner life not only postulate a reciprocal activity, but in so far as our esteem and desire for them is concerned, demand that each should develop to an equal degree and at an equal pace. When activity becomes feverish, it is proper that these inner things be fervent, too: faith, prayer, the desire to give oneself and one's all to God, the brilliance of an unsullied conscience, obedience, patient endurance of evils, a vital and vigilant charity spending itself for God and for one's neighbor. —

This is true for individual religious, if they are such in their soul as well as in their dress. And it is likewise for the whole religious group

the reason why the religious life is solidly maintained and found worthy of the highest approbation before God and men. With this earnest prayer the Church begs of you that your external work be conformed to your inner life so that these may constitute a perpetual balance to one another. Do you not, clerics and lay religious alike, all claim that you have embraced the state of evangelical perfection? If that is the case, bring forth the fruits of that state so that the mystical body of Christ, which is the Church, may draw more effective vigor from your strength and from your fervor. This is the very reason why those religious Orders that are dedicated to the contemplative life are in a sense necessary to the Church, for which they are a perpetual adornment and a wellspring of heavenly graces.

You well know that it is often said that charity towards one's neighbor is gradually losing its religious character and is becoming secularized. But any good deed towards another that does not originate with faith but flows from some other source, is not charity nor can it be called Catholic. Charity has dignity, it has spirit, it has power, all of which are lacking to mere philanthropy, even when this latter is armed with wealth and means. Thus it is that

those Catholic religious women who take care of the sick, when compared with those who perform the same task for the sake of humanity or for a livelihood, are found to possess something that is different and better. These religious sometimes take a second place when it comes to technical improvements; We here exhort them that in this matter they should make equal progress with others, nay, surpass them. But wherever religious women, filled with the vital inspiration of their Institute, give themselves to their work, daily prepared for the love of Christ to give up their lives for those who are sick, then is there diffused abroad a certain aura by means of which a wonderful power produces that which no technical advance nor any medicine could ever beget.

Let those Religious Orders and Congregations, which profess an active life, keep before their eyes and cherish everything that brings out the sacred character of their work, and let them kindle the fire of the Holy Spirit in the depths of a pure conscience.

V.

Most dearly beloved, We wish also briefly to touch on the desire of religious Institutes to accommodate themselves to the changing times

and, as in a beautiful alliance, to join together the old and the new.

When young people hear such expressions as, "We should be modern," and, "Our labors should be adapted to our times," they begin to be on fire with unusual fervor, and, if they are worthy fighters in the ranks of the religious state, because of this fervor they desire most intensely to transform the great endeavors of their future religious work. In a certain sense this is indeed reasonable. For it has generally happened that the founding fathers of each religious institute have thought out their own new system in order that they might come to grips with those pressing obligations and needs of the Church which admit of no delay; thus their undertakings were in accord with their times. If you wish to follow their example, as they have done, so do you also. Study the trends of thought, the decisions, the conduct of your contemporaries, with whom you live, and whatever you find good and profitable make use of as something precious; otherwise you will not be able to enlighten and help, to lift up and lead onward your fellow men.

It is the very nature of the heritage of the Church, a heritage which from the beginning was whole and entire and which has not varied

down through the ages, to be most well adapted to the needs and aspirations of the human race. The very heart of this heritage is the Catholic Faith, which We have safeguarded against fresh dangers by Our recent Encyclical *Humani Generis*. Be utterly convinced that, if you are devoted to preserving this faith untarnished, it carries within itself powers of such strength that it can successfully mold any age.

Moreover the end of the state of perfection, which you are bound to seek with the utmost zeal, is indeed a part of that same heritage. As a result of the protection and guidance of the religious life you yourselves become holy and you sanctify, either directly or indirectly, your neighbors so that they, participating ever more fully in divine grace, may live and die in true piety. In this same heritage do We find truth so exalted and so excellent that the unique path to perfection is seen to be the denial of self for the love of Christ. The changing times in no way affect this fundamental truth.

However, there are occasions, and these not a few, when you can and must favorably comply with the temper of men and the needs of the times. And this policy has already in no small measure been put into effect. In your present plans and proposals it finds clear and perfect

expression. It is obvious that you have already laudably initiated, either individually or through your institutes, many and varied reforms in the schools, in the education of the young, in relieving the miseries of mankind, and in cultivating and furthering sound doctrine. Because of these reforms it must be said—and no one can gainsay Our assertion—that a great amount of work is now being accomplished whereby you continue to meet the changing times in a new and fitting manner.

But in this adaptation, which you are seeking, to the needs of a changed age, We judge it to be of the greatest importance that you search out with prudent inquiry what spiritual forces lie hidden in your contemporaries, by what hidden desires they are influenced, and which among them are sincere. We are not referring to that sincerity which produces things to be re-proved and condemned and which gives expression to the tumult of passion and the poison of vice. Yet there is much good, and there is the earnest desire for greater good in all men just because they are human beings, and much more in so far as they are Christians, even though they do make mistakes and become involved in evil. You must encourage their good impulses; you must ably support their good

desires, taking care, however, that you do not take from the world what is distressing and evil, but that you put into it, from your own spiritual stores, what is approved and holy and in accord with the world's better inclinations. Therefore, by guarding that struggling good in others, by burnishing and increasing it, fashion from it, as from bits of gold, precious vessels; and as from tiny streams lead forth rivers.

There are those who think, and indeed not incorrectly, that there are three things which best fit the temper and the natural character of our age: breadth of view in thought and judgment, unity in directing and organizing, and promptness in action. Are not these three the characteristic marks of the Gospels themselves? Are they not the qualities of those who profess the Catholic Faith by word and deed? What greater breadth of vision can be laid open to Our thoughts than that offered by the words of the Apostle: "All things are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's."⁸

What closer unity in understanding and in loving can there be than that simple and single unity which is expressed in these words of

⁸ I Cor. III, 23.

Holy Writ: "God is all in all."⁹ "And 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 neighbor as thyself."¹⁰

That we may be prompt and spirited and free from any harmful remembrance of perishable things, the Scriptures give this admonition: "No one, having put his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."¹¹

If you wish to look with admiration on examples of virtue in which this triple excellence shines forth, recall to mind the Apostle Paul and all those who have accomplished in the Church of Christ outstanding works worthy of immortal memory.

Christian perfection and the salvation of the human race which must be procured are the goals that illumine your prayer and work, and they are the goals that the other sons of the Church, whether priests or laymen, should pursue. But you have the peculiar privilege of using the most efficient means—namely, the counsels of the Gospel through the profession of the religious vows—of subduing by a con-

⁹ I Cor. XV, 28.

¹⁰ Mark XII, 30-31.

¹¹ Luke IX, 62.

tinual struggle the concupiscence of the flesh, the concupiscence of the eyes, and the pride of life.¹² And thus you progress ever more in holiness and show yourselves prompt ministers of God in securing the salvation of mankind. Direct your thoughts and works towards the attainment of these high ideals. "Being rooted and grounded in love,"¹³ with a faith that is solid and strong, rich in humility, do not let slip any opportunity to lead men, your brothers, to their Creator and Redeemer, as wandering sheep to their Shepherd.

With loyal fidelity to this pattern so act that your manner of life be consonant with what you are called i.e., religious. Let the real meaning of your profession characterize your life. According to the words of the Apostle: "Be careful to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."¹⁴

Let peace reign within you and among you, between the members of the same Institute and house and with those who have been called to other Institutes; let it reign between you and all the others who work together with you and with whom you work to win men for Christ.

¹² Cf. I John II, 16.

¹³ Eph. III, 17.

¹⁴ Eph. IV, 3.

May there disappear from among you all controversy and discord which weaken and maim even undertakings full of promise. The Church, as a field waiting to be tilled by apostolic labor, stretches out far and wide and offers to everyone ample opportunity for indefatigable work.

If the fidelity of a religious be based on a manner of life whose texture is radiant with an unbending observance of the vows, if what is hard and difficult in securing the salvation of souls be considered as nothing by the priest, then shall it be true of them today what the Apostle says of the word of God: "It is living and efficient and keener than any two-edged sword."¹⁵

As an example, we recently admonished the faithful that in this calamitous age, in which the straitened condition and deplorable need of many struggle bitterly against exorbitant expenses, they should live moderately and be generous to their neighbors who are oppressed with need. Hasten, then; surpass others by your own example in this so urgent work of Christian perfection, of justice, and of charity; and persuade them to follow Christ.

¹⁵ Heb. IV, 12.

Finally, with every hope that out of this gathering the all-sufficing grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ may bring forth rich and permanent fruits, as a pledge of Our benevolence, We impart most lovingly to you here present, and to the religious families throughout the world, Our Apostolic Blessing.

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