

The beginning

Everything started from father Gemelli's inspiring ideas. He had the project of founding a Catholic University, the dream of Italian Catholics, to overcome at last the cultural inferiority caused by the *Non expedit* of the Church. (The *Non expedit* was a Vatican disposition forbidding the participation of Catholics in politics).

The *Non expedit* (*you cannot*) had, in fact, a strong influence and caused the detachment of the majority of Catholics from political life. Father Gemelli believed that, to make the University strong and lasting, it was absolutely necessary to have a spiritual institution including people at all levels (professors, assistant professors, technical and financial staff, public relations staff and even door-keepers) supporting its life and activities by all means.

He thought of the possibility of a lay consecration to God in the world, with vows taken secretly by lay people.

The initial problem was that this type of consecration was considered impossible and unimaginable at that time, as it did not exist in the canon law.

He started, however, with the women's Institute of "**the Missionaries of the Kingship of Christ**" originated within the Third Order as "a branch of the great and prolific Franciscan tree".

The first twelve "Franciscan Tertiaries of the Social Kingdom of the Sacred Heart" consecrated themselves to the Lord, in the little choir of the church of San Damiano in Assisi, on the nineteenth of November 1919. This was before the foundation of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart that took place in 1921. These early Missionaries, through their witness of consecrated life in the world, gave a great contribution to the official acknowledgement of this special vocation by the Church.

Seeing that the basic principle of this vocation was rightly motivated and being convinced that this way of life was good, Father Gemelli thought of starting a similar institution for men.

After a long preparation eleven young men met for a first retreat on 19th and 20th August 1928 at the "Apostolico Istituto" of Castelnuovo Fogliani (Piacenza). Most of them were in the university career and had been chosen very carefully. Father Gemelli preached that retreat and focused on the spirit, the aim and the innovative aspects of a lay consecration for the missionary apostolate in the world.

At the end of the retreat, on 20th August 1928, feast of Saint Bernard, the "**Pious Sodality of the Missionaries of the Kingship of Christ**" had its beginning.

The Pious Sodality, although characterized by the basic idea of a lay consecration to God in the world, was, according the Canon Law, just a pious association as it was neither a congregation nor a religious order. At the origin, the nature and goals of the Sodality were not oriented towards the preparation of consecrated lay men for a generic apostolate within the Church, but the consecration was finalized to the promotion and support of specific activities.

Its character was clearly defined in the first "Statute of the Pious Sodality of the men Missionaries of the Kingdom of Christ" of 1930 – 1937. [1] Article 2 specified the members' forms of apostolate to serve:

1. the Holy See and Bishops, especially to promote the Catholic Action;
2. the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, promoting its action and cooperating with it;
3. works or initiatives already promoted by the Sodality, such as "Opera della Regalità" or new ones to be started with the permission of the Superiors;
4. works or initiatives promoted by others, however with the permission of the Superiors.

It is worth noting that, according to article 4 of the 1928 statute:

the Pious Sodality consists of two groups of Missionaries: one for men and one for women. Each of the two groups has its own activities which are coordinated to reach common goals.

The norms of the Statute were drafted considering the situations of lay people living in the world in very different life circumstances; the members had to live and work in the world without the support of common life and belonging to the world. In fact the members of the Sodality:

Art. 5.3... continue to live in their families... have their own profession or job; this is both to sanctify their lives through work and to support themselves and to be apostles within a variety of social classes and contexts.

Art. 19... have no common life, but they accomplish their apostolic tasks individually...they dress in a way appropriate to the social status in which they accomplish their apostolate and have life standards according to it.

As this kind of life is not expected to be easy, it is necessary to be virtuous and live an intense interior life.

Art. 5.1 Every Missionary must aim at the perfection of interior life and consecrate himself to apostolate. In order to better achieve these aims, he makes a vow of chastity and the promises of poverty, obedience and apostolate.

Art. 17 states that the formation of members is inspired by Franciscan spirituality, according to the teachings of Saint Francis.

Since the beginning, there were clear statements about:

the specific aims of the Sodality,

the idea of lay people living in the world and consecrated to God to promote specific works;

the lay character, as a condition for mission itself, to work within the reality of the most diverse fields of society and of people's ordinary life;

the lay character of the way of living Religion, clearly distinguishing the Sodality from the Religious.

Besides:

the members have no convent and no common life, continue to live in their families and their social environment; their task is neither collective nor sheltered by the defence provided by a community, but it relies on each one's value; the members choose apostolic commitments suitable to their formation, aptitude and possibility.

In the years following its foundation, the Sodality developed very rapidly: the eleven of 1928 became nineteen the following year and forty-two in 1934; in 1938 the Sodality counted sixty-five members. In those years there was a lot of enthusiasm under the influence of Father Gemelli's dynamic personality. At this time when everything seemed to proceed at its best, according to the founder's intentions, the Sodality was shaken by a storm: in 1937 the "Elder Brother" (this was the name of the President at that time) elected on 27th March 1935, left the Sodality without telling anybody, not even father Gemelli, and got married. This painful defection was the cause of legitimate bewilderment for the Superiors and a hard test for all.

After this, **on 19th June 1937**, Father Gemelli wrote a long letter to all the Missionaries. He admitted with sincerity:

"...Really this has been a hard test; to show you how serious it has been, I must tell you that there was a moment in which I wondered whether we had taken a wrong path and we should have gone back."

He also said that he had been consoled by feeling everybody close to him, and he gave some important dispositions:

"First, this year's retreat must have a special meaning of renewal for all... Second, if any of you feels weak, if he has not been able to come to a decision for human reasons, if this commitment seems too hard for him, he is invited to open his heart and talk to one of the priests guiding you, choosing the one whom he feels he is more comfortable with."

He also announced some new measures:

- 1. From now on the men's group will be totally separated from the women's group. It will have its own name: "Union of the Missionaries of the Kingship of Christ". It will have its own statute that I am studying.*
- 2. Our Union is not linked either to the University, or other initiatives such as "Opera della Regalità", or the Catholic Action. Of course, each Missionary must work for these works, being ready to help them. However, his involvement in them, does not derive from his being a missionary but from his skills; he will be called to work for them as long as he is a good clerk, a competent professor, a suitable president, etc.*
- 3. As for the moment we cannot appoint another "Elder Brother", I entrust Luigi Gedda with this task for a temporary period. As he is in a position to travel to different places in Italy, he will have the opportunity to see you and talk to you on my behalf. [2] This until the Retreat... At the retreat we will designate another elder Brother.*
- 4. Each of you has to have a monthly day of recollection either by himself or with other Missionaries..."*

In the end, Father Gemelli communicated his decision to "wait for the right time" to ask the Holy See to approve "your" Sodality while "now the approval of the women's Sodality will be requested". [3]

This letter came at the end of the first period of our history that "the Father himself used to call the time of *sweet candies*". [4]

The conclusion of the letter referred to the men's Sodality as "your" and distinguished it from the women's, modifying the statement of the statute, (art. 4): "the Pious Sodality consists of two groups of Missionaries: one for men and one for women", because it considered the two groups as two different sodalities. On one hand, this was in coherence with the dispositions in the letter: "the men's group will be totally separated from the women's group" but, it also seemed to go beyond (or, may be, to anticipate) the Father's intentions. Different times for the request of approval and different names (Union and Pious Sodality) might have had consequences for the definition of the respective identities and the very existence of the two branches. This was evident after a short time.

The initial enthusiastic acceptance of this way of life was followed by increased awareness of the motivations of the vocation, deeper discernment, different evaluation of the aims and goals of the Sodality that were envisaged as wider, and not just limited to the Catholic University. One of the discussion points was the relationship of the Union with the works it was meant to serve, especially with the Catholic University, as it caused growing unease to those fulfilling the duties deriving from their membership in the Sodality and their professional autonomy as University staff. Another controversial point was the adoption of a specific spirituality such as Franciscan spirituality. For some, the rigorous reserve about the names of those belonging to the sodality was a source of misunderstandings.

With the increase of vocations, in an atmosphere of sincere, however uncritical, enthusiasm, some perplexities had already come out and now they seemed to be encouraged by the modifications introduced.

In the 1937 "**Statute of the Pious Union of the Missionaries of the Kingship of Christ**", the horizon of action became as wide as society, however without a complete detachment from the original choices and the link with the University and the Catholic Action became just preferential.

"Art.1. The Pious Union of the Missionaries of the Kingship of Christ is a union of lay men that, although living in society and fulfilling the tasks connected with their condition and their activities with apostolic spirit, consecrate their lives to the service of God for the apostolate in the world with the aim of cooperating to the extension of the kingdom of Our Lord. (...)

Art. 2 d) they work for the apostolate in the world with humble hearts, spirit of sacrifice, intense zeal and unconditioned and generous commitment to the Church.

Art. 3. (...) their apostolate can be in any field, but preferably in the Catholic Action, in support of the Catholic University, in schools and in charitable activities..." [5].

It seemed that the Sodality, after changing its name into Union, had become stronger and more confident; really different perspectives were emerging. Luigi Gedda was confirmed as Elder Brother in the election held at the end of the retreat (Assisi, 25th September - 1st October) and he thought of a group called "the workers" with very different characteristics, even if he thought it would be compatible with the Union and a group of members, faithful to him, fully shared his views.

The divergences in the interpretation of the ideal became deeper and deeper in 1938, about ten years after the foundation, while there was the perception of feelings of unrest, the expectation of something while there were no certainties. Actually there were two opposite mentalities even if this was not stated openly. Father Gemelli still thought of a sodality with precise aims; others thought of consecrated life in the world, without any commitment to specific works. There was a substantial divergence in the interpretation of the aims of the same ideal. [6]

Eventually Father Gemelli perceived the situation and its dangers and on **30th May 1938 he sent all members a very long and strong letter**, a very important one as in it he made all his plans manifest, his aims in founding the Sodality were clearly defined and all the events up to that point were summarized. This letter is meaningful also to understand how severe was Father Gemelli's pain because of the developments taking place at that time; while all members used the name "Union" that he had launched in his letter dated 19th June 1937, [7] in the **letter dated 30th May 1938** Father Gemelli uses just the name "Pious Sodality" all the time thus revealing his "nostalgia" for the service to the University [8]. In fact, the letter proposed the going back to the original purposes:

"In order for you to find your way in what I am going to tell you, it is necessary that you are reminded about the aims for which, with the help of some good souls, I founded the Pious Sodality... Since the time in which our Sodality has defined its characteristics, it has been clear that the lay apostolate of the members of our Sodality is for the support of three kinds of activity: The Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, the Catholic Action, "Opera della Regalità di Nostro Signore".

After disapproving the divergences about the aims of the Sodality, the letter continued as follows:

"Saying what I have just said does not mean that I deny that there may be other forms of sodalities, having other aims... But these different forms would not be our Sodality, as it was when it was started and it was constituted and how it developed, with its own aim for which it embraces the three works quoted above, links them in an organic way leading them to one end".

His conclusion was an invitation to all to a sincere personal examination:

"Do I or don't I have a vocation for this Sodality?... Those who do not have the service to the Catholic University as their supreme ideal are not suitable for us. Those who do not work actively in the Catholic Action and are happy just with the enrolment are not suitable for us. Those... who do not work in "Opera della Regalità" are not suitable for us. They may be good members of other bodies, but they are not suitable for our Sodality".

He then declared:

"It would be a great mistake to stay in the Sodality to avoid being the cause of pain for me. This lack of sincerity would cause an even greater pain that would continue misunderstandings and complaints. I will continue to have affection for those that will leave this way of life loyally and will be apostles in other groups or as individuals. Staying without a vocation would be the cause of dissolution". [9]

This extremely clear warning, however, did not produce any results. The only one who left was Giuseppe Lazzati, "one of the best members" who, in this same year 1938, started another group: the "Milites Christi" which is now the Secular Institute of "Christ King". He did not leave for disagreements with Father Gemelli but for a different interpretation of the aims of the Sodality and for strong personal contrasts with Luigi Gedda, who was the "Elder Brother" at that time. [10]

The letter of 30th May 1938, was followed by times of uncertainty, characterized by a situation of ambiguity and unrest until the election of **Enzo Franceschini as new "Elder Brother" on 20th September 1940**, during the retreat held at La Verna. [11]

Franceschini wanted to understand the situation and the reasons underlying it. For two years, until 1942, he tried to restore unity. When he saw that all the efforts to eliminate the feeling of unrest and avoid compromises might be detrimental, he decided to suggest the only possible solution: the closing of the Sodality. Father Gemelli was hesitant for a long time. Eventually he was convinced. Franceschini remembers how the painful decision was reached:

*"Four of us got together: Father Gemelli, Monsignor Olgiati and Armida Barelli -who had helped us as a really Elder Sister- and myself. Barelli did not agree and did not change her opinion while the Father and Monsignor Olgiati accepted the painful decision: **Consummatum est**". [12]*

On 26th June 1942, fourteen years after the foundation, the Sodality ceased its existence. Although hard, this decision was inevitable considering what had happened in that period. The new situation made everybody "totally free and fully responsible", as everybody was free. The previous members had a five months' period to pray, think, meditate, and decide to make the commitment again. Only those that, in conscience, believed in this commitment would make it.

In July and August 1942, Ezio Franceschini visited everybody to tell how things had developed, to talk openly and peacefully about the reasons of the crisis and the reasons that had led to that situation.

Of the first eleven of 1928, only one, Giorgio La Pira, was faithful to the initial ideal, while all the others took different paths. In September 1942, a numerous group, linked to Luigi Gedda and Carlo Carretto, started a **sodality** with very different characteristics, called "Operai" ("Workers"). [13]

After completing his demanding itinerary and arduous task, Franceschini realized that the group needed a *new structure* and a *new character*, especially for the aspects that had created the previous contrasts with those that had left the Sodality.

Father Gemelli, although painfully, understood that the Sodality did not have to have *its own works* and, making a considerable effort, gave up his original idea of an association serving the Catholic University. However, in his last years, he was firmly convinced that Secular Institutes should not have *their own works*. [14]

On 30th September, Franceschini sent everybody a letter, written with the contribution of Father Gemelli, presenting the basic points of the new Statute, so that each could decide, in conscience and freely, whether he was willing to join again. The programme had clear fundamental lines. During Christmas holidays (actually it was on the Feast of the Immaculate) the Father would hold a meeting for all those that meant to join the Sodality again. It had been set up according to the original Statute but was no longer the same even if it had kept its essential lines.

"The Sodality is a family of lay men consecrated, in a life of purity and in a spirit of poverty and obedience, to the apostolate in the world, keeping their lay condition.

The Sodality accomplishes its mission with:

- 1. members dedicated to the apostolate in the field of Catholic culture and especially supporting Catholic Universities;*
- 2. members serving the new works promoted by the Church and especially the Catholic University, the Catholic Action and "Opera della Regalità" that the Church promotes with the cooperation of lay people. However without any direct link with them;*
- 3. Franciscan spirituality as it provides an effective interpretation of the concept of secularity;*
- 4. reserve, as a personal link with the superiors, however without any external manifestation of this link". [15]*

The above are clear principles according to which the members would enjoy the freedom of action corresponding to the needs of people who wanted to dedicate themselves to the apostolate in the world.

The answers were expected by **8th December 1942**, feast of the Immaculate. Actually, they arrived earlier and on that date it was possible **to set up the Sodality again**.

A small group of twelve, (from the fifty-four at the time of the dissolution) started this way of life again, more carefully, with more prudence, trusting the Lord above all.

The group consisted of a smaller number, but it was unanimous about its aims that, in the meantime were being modified and clarified. In this way one of the nicest characteristics of the institute had its origin: the fraternal union of people coming from different cultural backgrounds, doing all kinds of jobs and professions.

In the crucial phase of the reconstruction, Franceschini, working close to Father Gemelli, had a role of founder, acknowledged by all for his inspiring ideas, his spiritual orientation, his firm and wise leadership. He was the “Elder Brother” and President of the Institute for thirty years. In 1943, it was impossible to have the retreat because of the bombing of Milan.

In 1944, the small flock met in Pallanza to draft the Statute. Father Stefano Bianchi, with his special help, had an important role in the writing of what was called “Carta di San Fermo” (Saint Fermo’s paper), as it was drawn up on 9th August, the day dedicated to that Saint.

Three main points were indicated and defended in it:

1. *as we are lay and we want to continue to be lay, the field of our action can be neither a hermitage, nor a convent, nor a monastery, but it is the very society in which we were born and in which we have been called to a social profession, the best opportunity to do our apostolate, voted to purity, in a spirit of poverty and obedience;*
2. *for greater efficacy of our activity which sometimes develops in difficult environments and often inaccessible to the official action of the Church, we want our consecration to be reserved;*
3. *St Francis that... in past centuries innovated society is our life ideal and model of Franciscan spirituality.* [16]

In the meantime, associations of lay people, both men and women, inspired by father Gemelli’s ideas were started in many parts of Europe.

The Church observed patiently, without any hurry to comment. Actually, the first declaration had been negative. The novelty of the proposal had been immediately and decidedly opposed by the canonists. The idea of lay people, living in the world and meaning to remain there, taking vows as if they were religious was inconceivable at that time. With regard to this, the answer of Cardinal Pietro Gasparri, the editor of the code of Canon Law, to Ida Barelli, when she had asked for his help for the final approval of the “Pious Sodality of the women Missionaries of the Kingship of Christ” was illuminating:

“Everything concerning the priesthood is under the authority of the Concistorial Congregation; everything concerning the Religious is under the authority of the Congregation of the Religious; everything concerning lay people is under the Congregation of the Council, which cannot approve associations whose members make a profession of the evangelical counsels and are in a state of perfection. For this reason, if you want to be lay and stay with the Congregation of the Council, you have to give up your vows; if you want to keep your vows, then request the approval of the Congregation of the Religious, that will grant it at once. [17]

Barelli insisted on “being lay and consecrated to do a better apostolate in the world and on being approved by the Church”. The Cardinal answered: “You will never make it!” and he added, laughing: “Quod non est in codice, non est in mundo”. [18] (“What is not in the Canon Law, cannot exist in the world”).

Following advice from Pio XI, Father Gemelli had organized an international meeting in Switzerland, held in the Bishop’s house at Sangallo. On 29th May 1938, the representatives of twenty groups from nine countries got together. They had a common ideal of lay consecration in the world while continuing to have an ordinary job or profession. All participants signed a request for the approval of the sodalities of lay people consecrated for the apostolate. Father Gemelli presented it to the Pope also with the signature of the Bishop of San Gallo and accompanied by a report he himself had written. [19]

All these documents were sent to the Congregation of the Council that, unluckily, had not yet expressed its opinion, when Pious XI died on 10th February 1939.

With the collaboration of Giuseppe Dossetti, assistant professor of Canon Law at the Catholic University, Father Gemelli redrafted his reflections on the San Gallo meeting to present them to Pio XII on the Feast of the Sacred Heart of that year and to the Congregation of the Council. The new document was a “Memoria” (“Memorandum”) entitled “**Associations of lay consecrated people in the world**”.

This memorandum was very important as it was the first attempt to find a juridical status for the associations of lay consecrated people, already existing in every European country and that in 1949 reached the number of sixty-eight.

The memorandum, that had been sent *pro manuscripto* also to the cardinals, was withdrawn by the Holy Office. Father Gemelli obeyed and, at the same time, he became aware that the Church was not ready yet to change the Canon Law and this demanded a long and difficult itinerary. However he did not give up.

His memorandum, in which for the first time there was a clear concept of the lay consecration in the world, as we will see, would contribute later to the foundation of Secular Institutes.

In the meantime the “phenomenon of the consecration of lay people” expanded more and more. And so the time came when the Church thought it could no longer just observe. This has always happened with the Church: it lets things grow without acknowledging them, and then, when they have grown, it has a say.

Pope Pious XII consulted all the experts in this area, starting from Father Gemelli, who was the first to use the formula *in saeculo et ex saeculo* to indicate lay people “living in the world and acting with the means of the world” and as he found them all favourable, he took action: first on 2nd February 1947, he published the Apostolic Constitution “Provida Mater Ecclesia”, the following year, on 12th March 1948, he issued his letter *motu proprio* “*Primo Feliciter*”.

With such documents, “the Church as a provident mother” acknowledged Secular Institutes with “the fullness of the apostolic authority”.

In “*Primo feliciter*”:

their own characteristic is defined (n.5):

“The transference of an Association of the Faithful to the higher canonical status of a Secular Institute must not obscure, even in special cases, the proper and specific character of the Institutes, namely, that they are secular and that this is the real nature of their calling. Everything about them must be clearly secular.”

the how and where of their apostolic commitment is reminded (n.6)

“The whole life of a member of a secular Institute, consecrated to God by the profession of perfection, must become an apostolate... Not only is this apostolate something that happens in the world, but it may almost be said to grow out of the world: its existence is in professions, activities, forms, places, circumstances of a secular nature.”

the distinction between Secular Institutes and Religious Institutes is made explicit (n.7):

“Secular Institutes do not come under the canonical discipline of Religious.

As a general rule the Church neither requires nor allows the application to Secular Institutes of legislation made for Religious”.

With these two documents the Church acknowledged the new forms of consecrated life juridically; it also established precise norms for the groups that from then on would be called “Secular Institutes”. For the first time the Church officially acknowledged lay consecration in the world. And the Church needed it. It was a sign of times.

Father Gemelli and the “Elder sister”, **Armida Barelli** had the nice surprise to find, in the important document “Primo Feliciter”, whole sentences from the “historical/juridical memorandum written by the Father after the San Gallo meeting, published *pro manuscripto* in 1939 and then withdrawn by the Holy Office. [20]

Father Gemelli was rightly called the “greatest pioneer of Secular Institutes, one of the founding fathers”.

The drafting of the Constitution

During the 1949 and 1950 retreats at Erba, the Institute studied the documents of the Magisterium very thoroughly, and after animated discussions, the first “**Constitution of the Missionaries of the Kingship of our Lord Jesus Christ**” was drafted according to the norms in the documents.

The guidelines in them are the result of a serious two-year work:

1. *chastity: joyful, vigilant, but not mortifying;*
2. *poverty: which is simple life style, but not meanness;*
3. *obedience: which is not submission, but joyful and fecund adhesion to God’s plan;*
4. *apostolate: to be done in the world with humble hearts and spirit of sacrifice;*
5. *Franciscan spirituality: which is neither disorder nor anarchy, but responsibility.*

The new draft was sent to the Congregation of Religious on 19th January 1951 with the “approval” granted by Cardinal Alfredo Ildefonso Schuster on 18th January 1951.

On **4th October 1951**, feast of St. Francis, Cardinal Schuster, Archbishop of Milan, signed the following decree:

“With *Provida Mater* of 2nd February 1947 Pious Unions have been granted a juridical and canonical status and transferred to the higher status of Secular Institutes.

After proper consideration of everything, with reference to the above mentioned Apostolic Constitution and the “Lex Peculiaris” of 19th March 1948; considering the “Nihil Obstat” granted by the Holy Congregation of the Religious, we have come to the decision of implementing the wish of the applicants. Therefore with this decree we institute the Secular Institute of the men Missionaries of the Kingship of our Lord Jesus Christ with all the consequences and canonical effects implied by the above mentioned Constitutions and Apostolic Laws” (Constitutions paragraph IV).

Although the Institute was of diocesan right, it could have, and actually already had members in other Italian dioceses and in other countries.

After the names *Pious Sodality and Union*, a third name: *Secular Institute*

Since 1951 and on the Institute has consolidated some characteristics: the Institute

1. gives strength to its members so that each of them, in his specific field, is able to act freely and responsibly: “in the greatest freedom, there is the greatest responsibility”;
2. aims at acting in a way so that its members are helped to need the Institute less and less and, to a certain extent, they feel they are the Institute. With reference to this, the example of parachutists trained to act in isolation was used; they are alone when they take decisions and when they assume responsibility.

Here we wish to remember that on **4th October 1953 in the church of San Damiano in Assisi**, father Gemelli with other 33 priests, started the third **Secular Institute**, that of priests, that will be called “**Priests Missionaries of the Kingship**”.

Vatican II mentioned Secular Institutes indirectly in the Constitution “Lumen Gentium”. In this document, the Fathers describe lay people with the characteristics of the members of Secular Institutes:

“the laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven.”

The decree “Perfectae Caritatis” was issued after “Lumen Gentium”; number 11 is very important for Secular Institutes, even if it belongs to a document dealing with Religious:

“Secular Institutes, although not Religious institutes involve a true and full profession of the evangelical counsels in the world. This profession is recognized by the Church... the institutes themselves should preserve their own proper, i.e., secular character, so that they may be able to carry out effectively everywhere in and, as it were, from the world the apostolate for which they were founded.”

After Vatican II many things changed in the life of the Church and in the life of believers. It was a gust of wind coming in and opening windows wide. This changed many things. The new atmosphere inspired the Institute to revise its positions. In this way we reached 1970.

On 10th August 1970, during the retreat held at Erba, **Giancarlo Brasca** was elected **President of the Institute**. At the first world Congress of Secular Institutes (1970) he encouraged the idea of a world Conference of Secular Institutes with strong arguments. As a member of the preparatory commission, he guided it wisely, acted as mediator among various positions, interpreted the different ideas and experiences. In this way he gave an invaluable contribution to the C.M.I.S. (World Conference of Secular Institutes). He was the animator and organizer of Secular Institutes in many parts of the world.

In 1972 he was elected first President of the World Conference of Secular Institutes (C.M.I.S.). He worked hard to prepare the first assembly of the new organism that took place in 1976. The theme was: "The prayer of Secular Institutes". At the same assembly he was elected president for another four year mandate during which he carefully collected the evaluation of every institute on the preparatory draft of the new Canon Law in order to express the opinion of C.M.I.S.. In June 1978, six months before his death he presented the result of this work to the Italian Conference of Secular Institutes. While he was talking, he surprised the listeners with an utterance not inherent with the topic he was dealing with: "I'm losing strength". Giancarlo passed away on 24th January 1979 at the age of 58.

Giancarlo Brasca lived all the phases of Vatican II enthusiastically and, on the base of the dispositions and indications of the Council, he dedicated himself with great determination to the demanding task of drafting the new Constitution.

It was a three year long activity involving animated discussion and intense participation. Every year at the retreat parts of the new Constitution were drafted, with a completely new structure but the same ideals and the same characteristics; every word had its precise meaning to express a rich content of duties and commitments. Some initial worries and difficulties due to deeply-rooted traditions were overcome and the new text was eventually approved by the Assembly of the Institute held during the 1973 retreat.

The Congregation of Religious and Secular Institutes, that supervised the whole phase of the revision with special care, approved the new Constitution in the same year with the formula "ad experimentum".

With reference to this, we must remember the work done by Don Mario Albertini, undersecretary of the Congregation of the Religious for the section of Secular Institutes. In agreement with G. Brasca he developed an important contribution for the approval of the new Constitution by the Church.

The long but precious period of the *experimentation*, lived with responsibility, was an important contribution to the approval of the Constitution by the Church.

As our Institute was of Diocesan right, The Archbishop of Milan, Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini approved the new Constitution with a formal act on 13th June 1980.

With the new Constitution, the Institute defined its typical characteristics:

1. *consecration: lived in the profession of the evangelical counsels in the world;*
2. *full and authentic secularity: The Institute confirms that it consists of secular men remaining in the world and acting "in saeculo et ex saeculo", that is in the world with the means of the world to which they fully belong. Therefore secularity is our own place to live as responsible Christians;*
3. *the choice of a profession: we are completely free to choose our jobs provided we try to be as competent as possible according to the talents received.*
4. *the apostolate, core and aim of our vocation: this is our first duty to be done in the different fields of human activities, in professions and jobs, in economy, in culture, in politics, in the social area. In these realities we discover the Lord's presence in the value of every person and we train for believers' courageous choices;*
5. *poverty: first of all personal poverty, that is governed by each individual member according to his possibilities, his wisdom and his generosity;*
6. *the poverty of the Institute: total. We do not possess either retreat houses or places for common life, nor for the old members, nor offices: we own absolutely nothing;*
7. *Franciscan spirituality: it permeates the whole Constitution and gives our vocation its typical character.*

Other important innovations:

1. *the end of isolation to be open to the other secular Institutes for fraternal exchange and useful collaboration;*
2. *the Institute develops; it becomes international extending to other countries both in Europe and in other parts of the world;*
3. *The Institute is a community helping its individual members to live and act in all the fields of human presence. It is a community journeying with the Church, a sign of the change of times.*
4. *Groups are established to facilitate every member's participation in the life of the Institute;*
5. *In this way the Institute becomes a real community consisting of groups present in diocesan realities and meeting on a monthly basis. The change of the name from "days of recollection" to "meetings" introduced a meaningful change: the days were planned in a different way and became a time of sharing, of growth, of enrichment in giving and receiving the charisma;*
6. *The annual retreats are organized in a way to foster the feeling of community, the sharing of experiences, comparing different views and talking;*
7. *After thinking over it for a long time, the formula of profession is changed: "I take, I make, I renew the vow" With some minor changes we have adopted Saint Francis's formula: "I... want to observe the Holy gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ living in chastity, poverty and obedience, according to the Constitution..."*

The Church has approved.

The **1980 Constitution** has then been integrated according to the new "Canon Law". The modifications were confirmed by the General Assembly of the Institute and approved by **Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini on 16th September 1989**.

The Institute developed in various Italian dioceses, in Brazil, France, Mexico, United States, Togo. Its extension urgently demanded the acknowledgment of the Institute as an Institute of *pontifical right*.

On 1st September 1992, the Archbishop of Milan, Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini sent the application for the acknowledgement of pontifical right to the "Congregation of Religious and Secular Institutes", supporting it with testimonial letters from the Bishops concerned.

After this first step, the work of revision of the Constitution was started as required by the procedures to pass from diocesan right under pontifical right.

The task appeared immediately as a demanding and hard one as our Constitution was very different from the others of the other institutes of pontifical right. During the first phase changes were envisaged that would imply a deep change of the specific characteristics of the Institute. Facing this worrying perspective an attitude of prudent wait was adopted, but, at the same time it was decided to continue the dialogue with the Congregation, which, in the long run, proved to be the right choice. We started to work in close collaboration with the Congregation of consecrated life and, in particular, with **Monsignor Juan José Doronsonoro**, undersecretary for Secular Institutes. A useful collaboration and an atmosphere of fraternal sharing of our worries were established with him. His contribution was important. He drafted some useful integrative contributions that permitted the positive conclusion of the task of revision of the Constitution.

On **21st November 1997**, the congress of the Congregation, acknowledged that the Institute “*deserves to be included among the Secular Institutes of pontifical right*”.

On **8th December 1997**, the “Congregation, with a decree raises the Secular Institute of the “missionaries of the Kingship of Christ” to the level of **pontifical right** with all the rights and obligations deriving from this status and approves the revised text of the Constitution”.

The longed for acknowledgement came on the meaningful solemnity **of the Immaculate Conception and on the fiftieth anniversary of the date of the refounding of the Institute.**

A difficult journey crossed by various events, has reached an important goal both for the history and the life of the Institute, and because this was the accomplishment of a strong wish expressed by Father Gemelli many times.

“As you know, the Father, perhaps for one of his paternal worries, longed for the day on which we would be a really big number. And he complained about our small number and at retreats he expressed his wish both privately and publicly. The issue was that he had been told by the Congregation that if we reached a fairly big number, we would be acknowledged as an Institute of pontifical right and therefore he pointed out the number as a far off target to be reached.” [21].

And also in his testament, Father Gemelli recommended:

“I wish to say a special word to the men Missionaries. Consider all the trials your Institute has gone through: Work so that the Church may reward you granting your Institute the acknowledgement of pontifical right”.

Lorenzo

Appendices

1

Letter from Giuseppe Lazzati to Father Gemelli

Milan, 21st June 1938

Reverend Father,

I think it is not difficult to imagine my response to your letter dated 30th May after my statements and the discussion following in the last Council meeting. Therefore this is to say that I resign from the Pious Union of the Missionaries of the Kingdom of Christ.

This does not mean that I wish to abandon the most precious thing I have in life after the Christian vocation that is my consecration to God for the Apostolate. I owe this vocation to you and Monsignor Olgiati and in this time of very deep pain I feel the need of acknowledging this and once more of expressing you my gratitude and devotion that go beyond the bond that I break today, to continue to serve in the ways you will consider suitable, if you wish to use my limited capacity.

The fact that I'm writing at a date very close to the deadline to send our answers can show you how painful it was to write what I have written. While I am writing there is a storm of thoughts and feelings in me that seems to invite me to delay, to ask for a longer time, to think. But I am sure I'm acting according to my conscience and feel at ease, when I consider these matters not in the perspective of feelings but praying before God.

And while I'm renewing my promise of fidelity to the vocation of which you were the instrument, I offer to God my intimate pain for the detachment from a thing that has a great place in my life. I offer this pain so that it may obtain for the Union I loved so much the life that you expect for it and which has not yet become a reality also because of me and for me a greater generosity in the consecration to God. I keep the Cross I received from your hands as a sign of my consecration; I ask you to be charitable and pray that I may conform to the Crucified to correspond to God's gift.

With filial affection, I ask for your paternal blessing.

In Christ

Giuseppe Lazzati

2

Letter from Giorgio La Pira to Enzo Franceschini

Feast of Saint Francis 1940

Dear Franceschini,

I wish to tell you in absolute truth that, since you have been at the helm of our sodality, I started to see clearly the “structure”, not of our individual vocations which is clearly defined, but the “link” of these vocations: this is a special link whose aim is not to mortify or level but to foster and develop “the free vocation of love” that God has given to each of us as a gift.

My dear brother, how sweet is this hard research that the Lord has put in the intimate part of our hearts...

What shall we do? All human frameworks are too narrow to contain this life that tends to expand to all directions without any rules.

This is our danger, our challenge, our problem because our “common channels” are too narrow and, at the same time, we need to canalize the water that the divine spring originates in us!

May the Lord help you to cope with a mixture of pains and joys: even our weak points are a precious witness of total undivided love, of purity without shadows...

In this way we'll do something: it's true we are useless servants but we are also *Dei Adiutores* (God's helpers); we will engrave Jesus' name on the "marble of society" because this is what Jesus wants from us.

May the Holy Virgin grant you, me and everyone the virginal interior purity that continually directs our eyes to Heaven as only in God we will find renewal and light in every moment of life.

Do pray for me

La Pira

Notes

[1] *Consacrati nel mondo. Istituto secolare dei Missionari della Regalità di Cristo 1928-1978, con lettere formative di Padre Gemelli o.f.m.*, edited by Ezio Franceschini, Milano, (pro manuscripto), 1979, pages 81-90.

[2] This was possible because Luigi Gedda was the president of GIAC (Young Men Catholic Association)

[3] For the complete letter see: *Consacrati ...*, cit., pages 203-208.

[4] Ezio Franceschini, *Documenti per la storia dell'Istituto*, Roma, (pro manuscripto), 1991, p. 165-166.

[5] *Consacrati ...*, cit., *Statuto della Pia Unione dei Missionari della Regalità di Cristo*, pages 115-124.

[6] For an evaluation of this period, see: *Documenti per la storia ...* cit., pages 169-179.

[7] For the use of the word "Union", see, for example, in E. Franceschini, *Documenti per la storia ...*, cit., the letter dated June 21st 1938 by Giuseppe Lazzati in the appendices at page 17.

[8] On this important aspect of Father Gemelli's thought and on the relationships between the Catholic University and our Institute, see the reflection by Ezio Franceschini in *Documenti per la storia ...*, cit., pages 126-127.

[9] Father Gemelli's complete letter is published in *Consacrati nel mondo*, cit., pages 208-215. For a more detailed analysis, see E. Franceschini, *Documenti per la storia ...*, cit., pages 172-180.

[10] See the letter dated June 21st 1938 by G. Lazzati in the Appendices, pages 17. More information can be found in E. Franceschini, *Documenti per la storia*, cit., pages 279-181.

[11] See E. Franceschini, *Documenti per la storia*, cit., p. 181, last part.

[12] See E. Franceschini, *Documenti per la storia ...*, cit., pages 150-151.

[13] See E. Franceschini, *Documenti per la storia ...*, cit., pp. 44 e 151.

[14] See note (8) and cfr. E. Franceschini, *Documenti per la storia ...*, cit., p. 127.

[15] E. Franceschini, *Documenti per la storia ...*, cit., pp. 23-24.

[16] *Consacrati...*, cit., pp. 127-128.

[17] This happened in 1932. See M. Sticco, *Una donna fra due secoli*, p. 511.

[18] M. Sticco, *Una donna ...*, cit., p. 512. Franceschini always preferred a different version of the cardinal's statement: "Quod non est in codice, non est in Ecclesia". Cfr. *Documenti ...*, cit., pages 92 e 207.

[19] M. Sticco, *Una donna ...*, cit, p. 592.

[20] M. Sticco, *Una donna ...*, cit, p. 774.

[21] E. Franceschini, *Un pò di esperienza e molto affetto, Orientamenti di vita spirituale (1940-1965)*, Roma 2003, p. 186.