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Living In The Secular World

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Dean of the International Training Institute, Reverend fathers, brothers and sisters, it indeed gives me great pleasure to find myself here. There is so much I could say, for example just to find my old friend Horst Symanovski and many other friends. However, tonight I want to relate some of my thoughts as I understand the Ecumenical Institute with which I have had a very lengthy friendship.

As I see it, and I am speaking purely personally here, the marvelous thing about the Institute is that it is a new kind of religious order and seems to be in the process of working out a kind of secular spirituality. Spirituality appropriate for a different kind of world than that in which the great religious orders were founded and have made such singular contributions to world Christianity and history.

Now the task of the church today is, without breaking from the past, to be reborn into a future which is so utterly unlike the past. This is why there is so much tension today--tension about liturgy, tension about the meaning of orders, tension in the field of moral philosophy, tension in moral theology, tension about the meaning of the poetry of the church. And all these things are because of the pressure of God on His Church in order to break it, in order to recreate it to be relevant to a totally new, barbaric, exciting, dangerous culture which, in fact, we are now witnessing across the world. And just as all the great religious orders of the past have been expendable, they have been able to break free of the traditional parts of the church, to break new ground in religious thinking and religious life, and exploration of the world of thought. As I see it, this is in fact what the Ecumenical Institute is trying to do, and this is being tremendously important to the whole history of the church and especially for the next two decades. You have to think in rather short terms today because history moves so fast. For this task it needs good minds and that degree of total commitment which the religious orders of the past have been able to command and today that is a secular commitment, and identification with the world. All these things are a part of the hurricane of the spirit in this time of history.

Now there are a few theological issues which I want to talk about for they are important for what you are seeking to do. I want to lay before you nothing particularly new. First, I would like to say a word about the cardinal understanding of Christian obedience

in the secular world that we are now in. There is a distinction which I think is truly biblical between what we call the Kingdom of God and the Church of God. The Church herself is in danger of falling into a sectarian spirit to avoid the pressure of the world as it becomes secular. There is a temptation for the Church to retreat and balance her thoughts and become a sectarian body. I suppose if you have a persecuted Church she may be driven into that stance but that is not the Church's privilege, because she is called to penetrate, to impregnate, to enlighten all the darkest recesses of the world in which she is set. The Church must be measured up to the doctrine of the Kingdom of God which means nothing less than the transformation of the world.

The Church must penetrate the world as the great Catholic Church has done in the fourth century when she came to a watershed and had to make a great decision. Before that she had been persecuted, had to live in the ghetto. In the fourth century she had to decide to accept her great destiny with all the ambiguities and compromises entailed and take on the task of converting the Roman Empire and beyond that, large tracts of the world. The Church in the fourth century was faithful to the call to go out and penetrate culture and civilization and we still have that task. But the temptation to the Church today is to retract to the sectarian state, rather than once more try to baptise the world. I see this rather clearly in the clergy who don't want to baptise the baby unless it's got about six baptised godparents who come to Communion every Sunday. On that basis you'd hardly baptise anybody. If Lord McCleod were here tonight he would be using a great phrase of his, I am certain, he would say that we must live as the great church of the fourth century and continue to "baptise by hosepipe." The Kingdom of God is distinct from the Church because the Church is a purely historical organization, in fact, a tool of the Kingdom. Now that is in my opinion a theological foundation that is crucial for us in the contemporary Church and it is central for the Ecumenical Institute.

My next point is that God speaks to man through the secular. This in my judgement follows logically from the last point I was making. There is, you see, a problem that theologians like Karl Barth were meaning by "secularization." He called it the blurring of the verticle dimension. That is that men have lost the sense of an open heaven under which we are always responsible. I do not know if I am just speaking for myself but I am a very secular man enclosed in a very secular world. Am I the only pagan here tonight? Are you dripping with religion? I suspect many of you are not. And so I want to say that one of the great theological tasks, I believe, layed upon an order of people committed to God in the way that the Ecumenical Institute is, is to grasp this theological formula; that God is to be apprehended and to be addressed as He addresses us overtly in the demands of the secular world.

When I say this, people sometimes say, "Well, Bishop, that's all just humanism." But I do not believe it is humanism, or, let

put it like this; I think Christianity is sublimely and to the nth degree human. It is about humanism multiplied by infinity, multiplied to perfection. It is about God expressed in human terms and therefore we are called to the fullness of the stature of the sons of God in whom Jesus is the model. Humanism is never an adequate gospel. It has to be humanism to the nth degree. That is to talk about Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of man, individual and corporate.

This is a very important theological word, that God does address Himself to the demands of secular life. For instance, we are all the children of Israel and Israel's religion was about, of course, God impacting man through the secular. That is why the ancient world--Rome, Greece, Egypt, and Babylon--looked upon these tiny little people and regarded them as atheists. And even in the temple of Jerusalem before its destruction there was nothing inside it, only empty rooms with no artwork, no images, no statues, nothing but a box, the ark, in which was kept some bread--manna for the world a few twigs, dried up, to remind them of Aaron's rod, a couple of bits of stone with the moral law written on them. And today the faith of Israel and Christianity through Israel persists while all those gods and goddesses can be found in the Louvre and the British museum. Which is to say that our response to God is not magic but is like Israel's, a response to the secular, in the secular. And I believe that this will always be a characteristic of a significant religious order--men and women highly committed to respond to God, to the demands He makes upon us in the secular world. God speaks to us through the pressure and the cry of pain in the world and the demand of the world upon us. You see religious orders have always had the sense of God bearing down on them and wanting open response. That has always been the characteristic of religious orders. It is a demand upon us to risk ever more naked exposure to secularization and the pain and tragedy of the world and its challenge.

Another word I would like to say is that the demands that are made upon man are through human strength as well as its weakness. This is the idea Dietrich Bonhoeffer pointed out in his Letters from Prison. The Church where she is spiritually alive recognizes these things. Of course if you don't see the demands made upon us by the hunger of the third world, the poverty of our big cities, the alienated people of our urban jungle, you will never see anything. This is the demand made upon us by man in his weakness. But let us say that it has also become clear that we must respond to the demands made upon us by God through man in his strength, the demands made upon man through his massive accumulation of scientific, technological and industrial power and the question of how to use them. Christians today, it seems, are wanting to turn away from man in his strength. They see the point of identifying with the slums, but they may not see that we can not get rid of slums today without the wealth that is created through science and technology. You know it is not enough to somehow identify with the

poor when the world has learned how to be wealthy. It is no good to say to the third world, "you remain the way you are and don't become dehumanized like we have in Western Europe, don't become alienated like we have, worshippers of idols and manna." Today I think that is the worst kind of pauperization. And so I would say that a part of our Christian obedience is to see that the right uses of science and technology are made, that their gifts and powers are distributed. This might be what it means to respond to the demands of God upon man in his strength.

So, what I want to say to you tonight is that what we need, in my judgment, is a great religious order of men and women highly committed to God who addresses us through the veils and masks of the secular, and who have these kinds of understandings of what He may be saying to us through those demands He makes on us. I believe a religious order of this kind is not simply what the church needs, but is what the world needs and I do not know of any other body of Christian people nearer to what I am talking about than the Ecumenical Institute and it gives me a great pleasure to be with you for the next two days.