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Mission to Modern Secular Man

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Well, Reverend Fathers, brothers and sisters, these two or three days that I have been here at the International Training Institute have been a great experience for me and I am sure they will be to you. I thought I would, at this time, lay before you a few ideas. You see the human mind has a marvellous way of stuffing all things of the moment and perhaps retaining such things as are occasionally of use to it. If you go away from your stay with the ITI with some things which are indelible, you will have reached a very great blessing. And I want to put a few things into that total heap of ideas that come to you in your stay here. I would like to lay before you two or three theological ideas and I would suggest to you that they can be worked out in practice. One of our real theological tasks, you know, is to take from the great armory of Christian thought and philosophy and ideas which have been accumulated there over the past two thousand years or more, and select from them some of the rapier-like tools which are still capable of being used in this modern secular world.

Of course I realize that all theological selectivity has a certain danger of falling into heresy and yet it is something I think we must do. It is the task of what we call theological economy in this world to select some things that promise to be of use to us in life and in our task of mission, as an indication of the Christian faith to the culture in which we are living. All new religious orders do begin by exercising theological economy. And even as you become an established order you begin to accumulate and grow your tradition until one day somebody has to come along again with a great axe and chop it all down. The real problem here is how to be reformist and catholic, how to love the great tradition of the past and yet be relevant to the future. That is a very big problem facing the church in her mission in the kind of age in which we are living. I spent a lovely evening yesterday with some old friends in Mainz and I went to see the great cathedral. It is a splendid place, a St. Paul's London or it might be a St. Peter's Rome. Yet, I believe it is too rich for the stomach of modern secular man. Now there would be some philistines who would suggest that it be removed. That would be ridiculous. But then I think of the great industrial masses as those I know so well in the North of England. This cathedral would be so foreign to them that it would stand in the way of any reception of the meaning of God. There is a real problem here of how to penetrate the mind of secular man without being iconoclastic. The problem is of choosing the theological tools

You know the great atheistic philosopher, Nietzsche somehow rang bells in the European mind when he spoke of the great churches as the tombs of God. A bishop is well aware of how many tombs there are in which God is buried and there is the great mass of mankind living outside in the streets, and the factories, and the housing blocks where something is happening to which we must make some kind of response. How to breach that gap? Well, I simply say that we need new models for the church and these are your commitment.

One of the models through which the Institute is responding is the cadre. We mean a highly committed little group of people, something with a high degree of motivation. The ecclesiola is another. It is the little church, a mercurial church, superimposed in the great church, easier to enter, easier to relate to, on the ground floor, a church without walls. All of these things. Then there are the house churches. You know John Wesley was the greatest priest the Church of England ever produced. In the midst of the rifts of the class structure Methodism grew up as many small groups of a dozen or so cared for by one person in a secular context. When Wesley died there were something like 7,000 men and women running groups like that. This is what we all want today, of course. These were a form of house churches.

Now, let me talk about another model. I have spent a lot of my lifetime creating "centers of infection, affection and disaffection." This is to speak again of groups of people, cadre formations in which you overcome the problems of men and women, of ordained and lay, of youth and aged and, I would even say, of faith and unfaith. That is really very important. For the great church you must have belief, but modern man cannot believe, or he believes only in part, his faith is strong and then withers away. Thus we have what the French call the "semi-chrétiens." Jesus was very conscious of people who were not with him and yet, in a marvelous way, with him. You can involve the "semi-chrétiens" in centres of infection, affection, and disaffection.

Now finally, I want to talk about the need for appropriate spirituality for our age. I will mention again that this is what the Ecumenical Institute is working towards. As you know, all religious orders have always been concerned with spirituality for their times, and today we know that many men and women are leaving their orders, not because of their unfaith, but because of their growing fear that the kind of spirituality that is being required of them is not what God is calling for. I feel that an attempt to work out a new spirituality is with us. We know that spirituality will be closely identified with the world. We see God in the secular, in the masses of humanity. New spirituality will have a special function in the urban areas; it will try to help people see the significance of what is happening in their lives; the great moments of their lives, of sadness and tragedy and of joy breaking out in them.

The new spirituality will be a response to the need for affirmation of our common humanity in alien places. I do not know if you know this but in the middle ages when the parochial church structures were built to last for a thousand years, the ordinary

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Special Address

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