

New study shows ignorance of secular institute vocation

WASHINGTON (CNS) — According to a recent study, U.S. Catholics who belong to secular institutes say one of the biggest problems they face is the ignorance of other Catholics about who they are or what they do.

If that obstacle can be overcome, "a significant number of single lay people may discover that the vocation is the one for which they are searching, the one to which God is calling them," concludes a summary of the study.

Members of secular institutes consecrate their lives to God in ways somewhat similar to the consecration of members of religious orders, but they are not religious sisters or brothers. Most continue to work in their regular job or profession, wear no distinctive garb and live in their own home rather than in community.

The study, funded by the Raskob Foundation, was conducted by a three-member research committee of the U.S. Conference of Secular Institutes.

Based on an in-depth survey of 168 members of the seven largest U.S. secular institutes, it was the first such study of U.S. institutes to be done.

The study analyzed three main subgroups among secular institute members:

- Externs, who make up the majority of all those in secular institutes — mostly women who live in their own residence and hold a secular job.

- Interns, also mostly women, who usually reside together in small groups and most often work for the institute's particular apostolate.

- Diocesan priests, who work in their assigned parish or diocesan jobs but join an institute after ordination for support in spiritual growth and as a means of special dedication to God.

Pope Pius XII established secular insti-

tutes as a church reality in 1947 with a papal document recognizing institutes whose members — lay or clerical — profess the evangelical counsels in the world and engage in apostolic work but do not practice a religious life in common.

Since then, according to the summary, 170 secular institutes have been formed around the world with a combined membership of more than 60,000.

In the United States there were just seven approved branches with a few members in the 1950s. Now there are more than 25 with a combined membership of about 1,000.

At least one institute, the Caritas Christi Secular Institute for Women of Pontifical Right, has a chapter in the Diocese of Rochester.

Secular institute members take vows or promises of consecration to the evangelical counsels, including celibate chastity.

Most members support themselves and must provide their own medical and retirement care.

The study was undertaken primarily to see whether differences of European cultures, where most of the secular institutes were formed and have their international headquarters, posed problems for American institute members. This proved not to be the case.

Instead, the summary said, the study revealed that the biggest difficulty most members faced was widespread ignorance of consecrated secular institutes as a way of life in the church.

EDITORS' NOTE: The full study, "Adjusting to a Secular Institute Lifestyle," costs \$20 a copy, including postage and handling. It is available from U.S. Conference of Secular Institute, P.O. Box 4556, Washington, D.C. 20017.

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