



LAY  
PRESENCE  
OF THE  
SERVANTS OF MARY

*On the cover:*

Barnaba da Modena.

*Our Lady of Mercy*, 1375-1376.

Genoa, Santa Maria dei Servi

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## LAY PRESENCE OF THE SERVANTS OF MARY

### A renewed intention to live the baptismal consecration

*Letter of the Prior General Fra Gottfried M. Wolff  
to the Family of the Friars and Sisters Servants of Mary  
at the end of the 600th Anniversary  
of the Bull Sedis Apostolicae Providentia (1424)*

The long period of the papacy in Avignon (1305-1376) and the Great Western Schism (1378-1417) made the need for reform of the Church urgent. In this line, the popes also took a series of measures concerning the mendicant orders, particularly in relation to the respective Third Orders, according to the older Franciscan experience.

For the Servants of Mary, on March 16, 1424, Pope Martin V published the Bull *Sedis Apostolicae Providentia*, by which he established that the *Rule of the friars and sisters of the Order of the Servants of Mary called the Consortium of the Servants of St. Mary*, would be the rule of life to be observed also in the future by the groups of lay people who gathered around the communities of the Servants of Mary.

The sixth centenary of the publication of this important papal document is a providential occasion to express the gratitude of the Order for the secular presence of the lay people

in the Servite Family and to offer a brief reflection on the present and future of their precious and varied reality.

*Lay people as protagonists in the Church*

The flourishing of Christian life at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century and in the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century was mainly due to lay movements and new religious orders.

At the origin of this flourishing was the medieval man's awareness of the need for a penitential commitment undertaken as an expression of a conversion. Penance, a fundamental "cultural" element for the medieval man, is in fact at the root of the decision to enter a monastery or to choose the life of a hermit; but it is also at the root of the decision to become a pilgrim, a crusader, or to assume a state of life suitable to lay people who continue to live in the century.

Some concrete elements accompany the decision to undertake this penitential commitment: the decision not to bear arms, not to swear, not to be involved in court, to observe continence, to wear humble clothing, to lead a retired life. But while this decision had previously led to an inability to perform acts of legal value and to a forced separation from the century, in this period penance was understood as an evangelical commitment and as a peaceful and proactive protest "in times that were disastrous for Church and State, when anger, hatred, and discord were tearing cities apart<sup>1</sup>".

These penitent laymen gradually formed an “Ordo poenitentium”, an intermediate state between the lay state and the monastic state. It had a close and fruitful relationship with the new mendicant orders.

### *Lay Servants of Mary*

The *Legenda de origine Ordinis*<sup>2</sup> testifies that the Seven Founders of the Order lived their secularity to the full: they were merchants, they belonged to a lay Marian movement, in relation to the Church some were married, others were widowed, still others lived in chastity for the Kingdom. With regard to their journey of faith, the 14<sup>th</sup> century text underlines that “through the commitment to penance, freely accepted, the true Christian faith had become like a habit in them, even if not all of them observed the bonds inherent in Baptism” (LO 19).

It is also interesting to note the observation in n. 16, which places their life in relation to the Church: “[...] With the threefold state of the Church in which they found themselves, [Our Lady] wished to make it clear to everyone with equal clarity that her Order, as the sixth spiritual city of refuge, could be peacefully entered by everyone, in whatever state they were in, either for the attainment of health of the soul, or for the preservation of health if they had already attained it, and finally to obtain from her and from her Son grace and glory after serving with scrupulous fidelity until the end of their lives. This first state is described in the little book of the *old Constitutions*, which they observed in the world before they lived in common life. Here we read: ‘Be-

cause some of them were married and therefore unable to pursue a stricter way of life, they decided to choose a middle and more common way, easy for both the married and unmarried to observe” (LO 16).

In this way, the Servants of Mary, from their origins and through the activities developed around their communities, are linked to some lay groups of the time with Marian characteristics, while these groups gradually understand the beauty and the great horizon of belonging to a religious order in the Church.

A fundamental element is the possibility of sharing in the spiritual goods of the Order, which opens up to the laity a new horizon, Catholic in the literal sense of the word, with a universal scope. The first indication of this profound communion is a document of the Prior General of the Order, fra Filippo Benizi, who, from Arezzo, the seat of the General Chapter of 1273, and in consideration of the affection he had for the Order, granted to the members of the Society of Laude the right to share in the fruits of the “vigils and prayers, fasts and Masses, and other goods” carried out in the Order itself,<sup>3</sup> making them also sharers in the prayers of suffrage and thus equating them - on a spiritual level - with the friars of the Order.

### *The Rule of Martin V*

At the request of the Prior General, Fra Stefano da Borgo San Sepolcro, shortly before his death, and of the brothers and sisters known as the “Consortium of the Servants of

Saint Mary”, Pope Martin V - who knew the Servants of Mary well, had been Cardinal Protector of the Order since 1407 and held the Prior General in high esteem - approved the Rule or Form of Life of the laity (men and women) of the said “Consortium” on March 16, 1424, thus granting canonical recognition by the Church to the lay groups that had long been gathered around many communities of the Order. This recognition led to a fruitful period: in a few years about twenty of these new fraternities were founded, mostly for women, while the majority of the experiences that gathered around the communities of the Order to live its spirituality adhered to the *Rule*, also thanks to the promotion that the friars gave to it.

The texts of the *Rules* were increasingly supplemented by a list of indulgences granted by the ecclesiastical authority on various occasions, and by *Catalogs* of the blessed men and women of the Order, in the form of lists and biographies. The knowledge of these catalogs has been an excellent means of publicity for the Third Order.

*Third Order, Societas habitus, Confraternities of Our Lady of Sorrows*

Two different ways of embodying the same Rule of Life soon emerged: on the one hand, the groups that formed themselves into the Third Order, which lived the works of corporal mercy together with the devotional dimension, especially Marian; on the other hand, the fraternities that emphasized exclusively the spiritual-devotional dimension

through acts of Marian devotion, with growing interest in the aspect of the Sorrow of the Virgin that was developing in the Order, evolving into *Societates habitus*.

The distinction between the two ways of living the Rule was clarified over time and Innocent X, with the brief *Cum sicut dilectus Filius* (1645) established that these associations could take the name of *Confraternities of the Seven Sorrows of the Most Blessed Virgin*, reaffirming the exclusive competence of the Prior General of the Order for their foundation.

This form of lay association of the Servants of Mary, which had an extraordinary expansion particularly in the 18th century even beyond the borders of Italy and Europe, privileged a particular aspect of the charism of the Servants of Mary which young Philip recalled to the two Dominicans from Germany: “we call ourselves Servants of the glorious Virgin, of whose widowhood we wear the habit<sup>47</sup>”.

### *The Rule of Life of the Secular Order*

The political suppressions that affected religious institutes in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries are related to two phenomena that are surprisingly found throughout the Church and obviously also in the Order of the Servants of Mary.

The first is the new protagonism of the lay Catholics in the Church and in society; this phenomenon also leads to the revival of the Third Order among the Servants, favored by the publication of *Prayer Manuals* and by the diffusion of some magazines that gave new attention to the lay component of the Order.

The second important element of novelty, also common to the whole Church, is the flourishing of women's congregations of active life, often founded by young women associated with the Third Order or by priests belonging to the association.

The *Rule* of Martin V, however, remained the basis of every form of updating of the Third Order of the Servants of Mary until the 20th century. After an initial intervention by Leo XIII, with the reduction of the chapters containing the obligations of prayer and fasting, the revision of the *Rule* of 1925 and the updates adopted after the Second Vatican Council, the Third Order experienced a significant numerical growth in the 1980's.

Thus, on April 29, 1995, the Holy See approved the present *Rule of Life* written in English: in it, with a significant difference in the conception of the Family of the Servants of Mary, the *experience was called the Servite Secular Order*, in a sense of communion.

Following this approval, the Prior General, Fra Hubert M. Moons, sent two short and concise letters.

In the letter to the Secular Order, he addressed the laity as "a living part of the Servite family" and encouraged them to "walk the path of holiness, to build the ecclesial community, to proclaim the Gospel in those places and situations where only you, by virtue of your lay status, can bear witness to Christ, Son of Mary and firstborn among many brethren<sup>5</sup>".

Fra Moons reminded the friars of the Order that "the existence of a fraternity of the Secular Order is a sign of the ability of the local community to radiate the charism of the Order in its own environment" and affirmed that "the

presence of lay people who share our spirituality by vocation will help us to remain faithful to our integration into the world, to remember that we were born into the Church by a group of seven lay Florentines, and to appreciate the diversity of ministries in the Church”<sup>6</sup>.

This brief glance at the historical development of the lay component of the Order of the Servants of Mary spontaneously gives rise to a feeling of gratitude to God and to the Blessed Mother, who have given us the intuition that the riches given to each one of us are truly fruitful. We, Friars and Sisters of the Servants of Mary, have discovered increasingly that we belong to a single Family, diverse in its charisms but united by the ideal of fraternity and service inspired by Mary. We are aware that we still need a profound conversion to make this ideal authentic and concrete; but we are also aware that we cannot do without the encounter between the religious and lay parts of our Family: one cannot exist without the other<sup>7</sup>.

### *The Riches of the Order*

The Order communicates its spiritual goods, its most precious riches, to all who desire them. The first and inexhaustible richness of the Order is the presence of the glorious Mother of God: it is she, “the humble Handmaid of the Lord”, united “to the redemptive mission of the Son, the suffering Servant of the Lord<sup>8</sup>”, “the humble Woman who placed her hope in the Lord<sup>9</sup>”, who inspired our Fathers, her «precipui amatores (singular lovers)<sup>10</sup>”, a community

project<sup>11</sup>. We are deeply aware that “nothing in our life ... remains outside the exemplary influence of Mary of Nazareth<sup>12</sup>”. She helps all of us, consecrated and lay, in our “journey towards Christ and in our commitment to communicate him to others”<sup>13</sup>.

The friar or sister Servant of Mary who chooses the monastic life, that is, the life focused to the radical search for the Absolute – communicates the joy of belonging to God, of discovering in Him alone the meaning of one’s existence. The beauty of this life lies in prayer, in listening to the Word and in mutual obedience, in fraternal service, in the sharing of goods, in work lived as praise to God, the principle of all activity, and the source of communion and solidarity, and also in welcoming everyone, especially the humblest and poorest. It is precisely from this way of life, as history teaches us, that lay groups are born with the desire to welcome, in the family and social situations in which they find themselves, the demands of the Christian vocation which by its very nature requires the gift of one’s whole life<sup>14</sup>. One understands the great responsibility that the Order has for the birth and formation of these groups: it is its life, lived faithfully, that is the true place of gestation.

### *School of spirituality*

Originally, the Third Order had a rigorous way of life that in the end made it little different from a true religious order. For this reason, forms of association more suited to lay people were adopted. Today, however, in a world that

has undergone profound changes and in which faith is challenged in many ways, the Secular Order cannot be a simple devotional movement, but must be a school of spirituality, where one is “supported in realizing the specific call to holiness<sup>15</sup>” and educated to “collaborate in building a new world in the light of evangelical values<sup>16</sup>”.

The religious component of the Servite Family bears witness to the Gospel according to its particular form of life, which however does not belong to it in an exclusive way, in the sense that every authentically Christian existence should appropriate this form and live, in the real condition in which it finds itself, an “interiorized monasticism”, that is, “being a sign, a reference to the “totally different”<sup>17</sup>”.

This experience was lived by our Fathers when they were still in the world and before they were gathered together, as we read in the third chapter of the *Legenda de origine*: from this experience the spirituality of the lay Servants of Mary can draw new ideas for further study<sup>18</sup>. The author of the *Legenda* states: “The true Christian faith with which [these glorious men] clothed themselves compelled them to contemplate the life of grace and glory. [Having clothed themselves with the true Christian faith, they were now constantly led to contemplate heavenly realities: it was a tendency that had become a natural inclination. [...] They could say in all truth with the Apostle: Our citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20) (*Nostra conversatio in celis est*)<sup>19</sup>”. *Conversatio*, in the Latin of the Vulgate (which is quoted by the *Legenda*), means “conduct” or “way of life”: Our way of being and acting in the world must be “in heaven”, that is, it must

reflect a reality that is not worldly but heavenly, in conformity with the mind and will of God. The brothers and sisters of the Secular Order, who “commit themselves as lay people to follow in the footsteps of the Seven Saints in their family and secular life”<sup>20</sup>, live in the manner of the Fathers, being in the world without sharing its ideologies, fashions, idols; their activity in this world transmits the light of God, is inhabited by a Word that transforms life and makes it a revelation of God’s love.

Two articles of the *Rule of Life* are significant in this regard: article 13, which states that the life of the lay Servant of Mary must be “simple and of service, totally oriented to God,” and especially article 36, which echoes the religious experience of the Fathers: “With the commitment and seriousness of work, with simplicity and austerity of life, with sensitivity to the needs of others, with service to the most needy, the lay Servants of Mary, both as individuals and as a fraternity wish to bear witness to their love for the poor Christ, and to proclaim to the man of today, tempted by the desire for money, power and pleasure, that God is the only necessary good, the only One who can satisfy the heart of man”.

To remain faithful to this awareness is certainly not an easy task for those who live in the world: I know how difficult it is to combine fidelity with prayer and with family and social commitments that require time, application, study.

There is also always the danger of activism, which can completely absorb a person to the point of identifying with what one is doing, deluding oneself into believing that one’s identity and the meaning of life can be found in it. What a

great consolation it can be to have a religious community that opens its spaces and allows others to participate in its liturgy, in its work, in its life that made fully human by the fraternal friendship that animates it!

*The necessary support*

If, as I have said, the Order has a great responsibility for the formation and growth of the lay fraternity, it also has an important role to play in supporting its life. In our history we have many examples of the loving care with which lay people, brothers and sisters, have helped Servite communities in need, with the sick or those in difficulty. Even today there are many occasions when the Order can count on the closeness and collaboration of the laity: we give thanks to them and to the Lord.

Of course it is not only a question of material help. Their evangelical witness has given rise to interesting experiences of community, to monasteries of contemplative life, and inspiration from the figures of the Blessed and Saints who are the glory and beauty of the Order. We must not forget that the Marian devotion of lay groups has often been the fertile ground for the deepening of devotion to Our Lady, especially as Our Lady of Sorrows.

There is another reason why the closeness of the laity is vital for the Order. The laity bring a direct knowledge of the reality in which they live; this helps religious not to be alienated from the concrete, sometimes very difficult situations of life; they better understand and share the anxieties of

those who are unable to meet the demands of daily life; they reduce the often excessive importance given to questions of common life; they make the liturgy true by introducing into it the concrete content of the expectations and hopes of humanity; finally they come to a better understanding of the meaning of Sacred Scripture, which they read and meditate on daily.

### *Conclusion*

From the single vine of Monte Senario, the Holy Spirit has, over the centuries, inspired and made grow new forms appropriate to the times, which have allowed and continue to allow the laity to live the charism of the Servants of Mary as protagonists. The two Secular Institutes - the Secular Servite Institute and Regnum Mariae - the Lay Diaconate of the Servants of Mary, the various groups and associations, also linked to the Congregations of Women, the Secular Order itself, are the fragrant flowers of this vine which was born almost eight hundred years ago.

Together, as the Family of the Servants of Mary, we wish to thank the Lord and Our Lady for this fruitfulness and implore its continuity.

In conclusion, I would like to make my own the words of the author of the *Legenda de origine*: "The Fathers, therefore, have left an example of life to us who have come after them. We, too, must leave a similar example to those who will enter the Order after us; they, in turn will be called to leave their example to posterity and posterity to others and

so on. If we behave in this way and all the brothers who will succeed us in our Order will do the same, the Order will have a great advantage. Our Lady will have no small joy: she will feel comforted by us, her servants, while we will honor her with our service, which will show how worthy she is of all reverence. Our Lord will also be ready to always enrich our Order with spiritual gifts and graces, thus showing His satisfaction to all<sup>21</sup>".

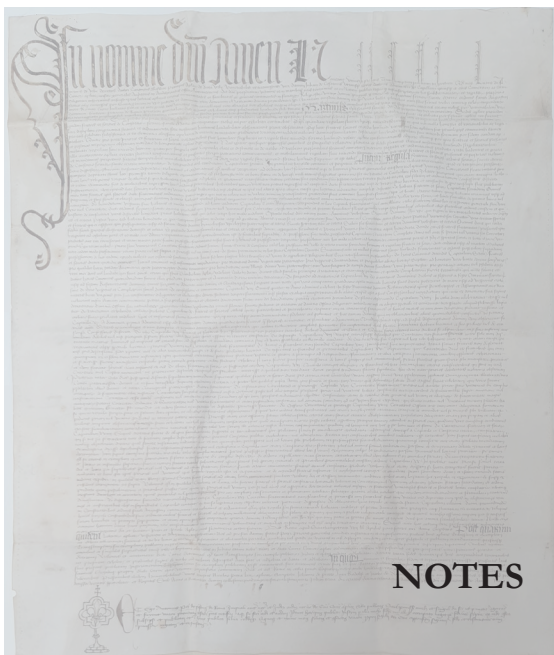


*Fra Gottfried M. Wolff*

FRA GOTTFRIED M. WOLFF O.S.M.  
Prior general

Desde nuestro convento de "Sant'Alessio Falconieri" en Roma  
17 de febrero de 2025

Solemnidad de los Siete Santos Fundadores de la Orden de los Siervos de María



NOTES

<sup>1</sup>PAOLO VI, *Discorso ai partecipanti al capitolo generale dell'Ordine dei Servi di Maria*, in *Acta Ordinis Servorum b.V.M.*; a. LIX (1974), vol. 35, fasc. 172, Atti del capitolo generale dei Servi di Maria (Roma, 15 settembre-14 ottobre 1974. I. Cronaca e Atti, Curia Generalizia O.S.M.; Roma 1976, pp. 550-551. The Holy Father continued extemporaneously: "Tragic, almost unbearable moments in social life are the occasion for the Church to sprout new branches and offshoots that are so fruitful, so beautiful, so flourishing! You were born in a time that was dark, disordered and, one might say, without a future. And here you are, instead, guaranteeing the history of the city, of the countries where you have your seats. Providence at work!".

<sup>2</sup>*Legenda de origine Ordinis*, in *Fonti storico-spirituali dei Servi di santa Maria*. I. dal 1245 al 1348, [Servitium editrice], [Sotto il Monte, BG] 1998 (d'ora in poi: LO).

<sup>3</sup>FILIPPO BENIZI, *Exigente pie devotionis*, in *Fonti storico-spirituali*, I, p. 36.

<sup>4</sup>*Legenda vulgata di san Filippo Benizi*, n. 8, in *Fonti storico-spirituali*, I, p. 270.

<sup>5</sup>*Acta Ordinis Servorum B.V.M.*, a. LXXX (1995), vol. 62, fasc. 209, Curia Generalis O.S.M., Romae 1995, p. 87.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 89.

<sup>7</sup>ORDINE SECOLARE DEI SERVI DI MARIA (= OSSM), *Rule of life*, Curia Generalizia OSM, Roma 1996, art. 6: "The Secular Order of Servants of Mary, made up of men and women living out their baptismal consecration in the world, is one of these expressions of the shared vocation of the Servite Order. It shares in the same ideal, commitment to evangelical, apostolic life and piety towards the Mother of God; with the Servite Order it constitutes a single Family".

<sup>8</sup> *Constitutions of the Order of Friar Servants of Mary*, Curia Generalizia OSM, Roma 2015, art. 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, art. 7.

<sup>10</sup>LO 18, in *Fonti storico-spirituali*, I, p. 210: “Because of their ardent love for the Blessed Mother” the Seven Founders of the Order were part of an important Marian society before their life together.

<sup>11</sup>Cfr. The Collect of the Mass for the Solemnity of the Seven Fathers: “O merciful God, by your providential plan our glorious Lady, through the work of the Seven Holy Fathers, raised up the family of her Servants”.

<sup>12</sup>210° CAPITOLO GENERALE OSM, Servi del Magnificat. *Il cantico della Vergine e la vita consacrata, Servitium*, Sotto il Monte, BG 1996, p. 89.

<sup>13</sup>*Constitutions of the Order*, art. 6; *OSSM, Rule of life*, art. 37.

<sup>14</sup>“This gift of a vocation finds its roots in baptismal consecration and with its acceptance the

Servants of Mary commit themselves to follow Christ and bring to fulfillment the evangelical commandment of love” (*OSSM, Rule of life*, art. 9).

<sup>15</sup>*Ibidem*, art. 11.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibidem*, art. 39.

<sup>17</sup>P. EVDOKIMOV, *Il monachesimo interiorizzato*, Cittadella editrice, Assisi 2013, p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> LO 15-21, in *Fonti storico-spirituali*, I, pp. 206-216. In the chapter you will find a detailed explanation of what art. 7 of the Rule of life declares: “As secular members of the Servite Order, these sisters and brothers are an authentic witness to the lay origins of the Order of Servants of Mary, whose Seven Founders began their pilgrimage as lay people united in prayer and service in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

<sup>19</sup>LO 20, in *Fonti storico-spirituali*, I, pp. 214-215.

<sup>20</sup>*OSSM, Rule of life*, art. 5.

<sup>21</sup> LO 2, in *Fonti storico-spirituali*, I, p. 193

*Back cover:*

Bull *Sedis apostolicae providentia* of Martin V,  
15 april 1424 (authentic copy of 1425),  
detail. Rome, OSM General Archives. Historical Section

