

**SACRED CONGREGATION FOR RELIGIOUS AND FOR SECULAR INSTITUTES**

***ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS IN THE CHURCH'S TEACHING ON RELIGIOUS  
LIFE***

***AS APPLIED TO INSTITUTES DEDICATED TO WORKS OF THE  
APOSTOLATE***

**INTRODUCTION**

1. The renewal of religious life during the past twenty years has been in many respects an experience of faith. Courageous and generous efforts have been made to explore prayerfully and deeply what it means to live consecrated life according to the Gospel, the founding charism of a religious institute, and the signs of the times. Religious institutes dedicated to works of the apostolate have tried, in addition, to meet the changes required by the rapidly evolving societies to which they are sent and by the developments in communication which affect their possibilities of evangelization. At the same time, these institutes have been dealing with sudden shifts in their own internal situations: rising median age, fewer vocations, diminishing numbers, pluriformity of life-style and works, and frequently insecurity regarding identity. The result has been an understandably mixed experience with many positive aspects and some which raise important questions.

2. Now, with the ending of the period of special experimentation mandated by *Ecclesiae Sanctae* II, many religious institutes dedicated to works of the apostolate are reviewing their experience. With the approval of their revised constitutions and the coming into effect of the newly formulated Code of Canon Law, they are moving into a new phase of their history. At this point of new beginning, they hear the repeated pastoral call of Pope John Paul II to evaluate objectively and humbly the years of experimentation so as to recognize their positive elements and their deviations (to International Union of Women Superiors General 1979; to Major Superiors of Men and Women Religious in France, 1980). Religious superiors and chapters have asked this Sacred Congregation for directives as they assess the recent past and look toward the future. Bishops, too, because of their special responsibility for fostering religious life, have asked for counsel. In view of the importance of these developments, the Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes, at the direction of the Holy Father, has prepared this text of principles and fundamental norms. Its purpose is to present a clear statement of the Church's teaching regarding religious life at a moment which is particularly significant and opportune.

3. This teaching has been set forth in our times in the great documents of the Second Vatican Council, particularly *Lumen Gentium*, *Perfectae Caritatis* and *Ad Gentes*. It has been further developed in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelica Testificatio* of Paul VI, in the addresses of Pope John Paul II, and in the documents of this Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes, especially *Mutuae Relationes*, *Religious and Human Promotion*, and *The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life*. Most recently, its doctrinal richness has been distilled and reflected in the revised Code of Canon Law. All these texts build on the rich patrimony of pre-conciliar teaching to deepen and refine a theology of religious life which has

developed consistently down the centuries.

4. Religious life itself is a historical as well as a theological reality. The lived experience, today as in the past, is varied and this is important. At the same time, experience is a dimension which needs to be tested in relation to the Gospel foundation, the magisterium of the Church, and the approved constitutions of an institute. The Church regards certain elements as essential to religious life: the call of God and consecration to him through profession of the evangelical counsels by public vows; a stable form of community life; for institutes dedicated to apostolic works, a sharing in Christ's mission by a corporate apostolate faithful to a specific founding gift and sound tradition; personal and community prayer; asceticism; public witness; a specific relation to the Church; a life-long formation; and a form of government calling for religious authority based on faith. Historical and cultural changes bring about evolution in the lived reality, but the forms and direction that the evolution takes are determined by the essential elements without which religious life loses its identity. In the present text addressed to institutes dedicated to apostolic works this Sacred Congregation confines itself to a clarification and re-statement of these essential elements.

## I.

### **RELIGIOUS LIFE: A PARTICULAR FORM OF CONSECRATION TO GOD**

5. Consecration is the basis of religious life. By insisting on this, the Church places the first emphasis on the initiative of God and on the transforming relation to him which religious life involves. Consecration is a divine action. God calls a person whom he sets apart for a particular dedication to himself. At the same time, he offers the grace to respond so that consecration is expressed on the human side by a profound and free self-surrender. The resulting relationship is pure gift. It is a covenant of mutual love and fidelity, of communion and mission, established for God's glory, the joy of the person consecrated, and the salvation of the world.

6. Jesus himself is the one whom the Father consecrated and sent in a supreme way (cf. *Jn* 10:36). He sums up all the consecrations of the old law, which foreshadowed his own, and in him is consecrated the new People of God, henceforth mysteriously united to him. By baptism, Jesus shares his life with each Christian. Each is sanctified in the Son. Each is called to holiness. Each is sent to share the mission of Christ and is given the capacity to grow in the love and service of the Lord. This baptismal gift is the fundamental Christian consecration and is the root of all others.

7. Jesus lived his own consecration precisely as Son of God: dependent on the Father, loving him above all and completely given to his will. These aspects of his life as Son are shared by all Christians. To some, however, for the sake of all, God gives the gift of a closer following of Christ in his poverty, chastity, and obedience through a public profession of these counsels mediated by the Church. This profession, in imitation of Christ, manifests a particular consecration which is "rooted in that of baptism and is a fuller expression of it" (PC 5). The fuller expression recalls the hold of the divine person of the Word over the human nature which he assumed and it invites a response like that of Jesus: a dedication of oneself to God in

a way which he alone makes possible and which witnesses to his holiness and absoluteness. Such a consecration is a gift of God: a grace freely given.

8. When consecration by profession of the counsels is affirmed as a definitive response to God in a public commitment taken before the Church, it belongs to the life and holiness of the Church (cf. LG 44). It is the Church which authenticates the gift and which mediates the consecration. Christians so consecrated strive to live now what will be in the after-life. Such a life "more fully manifests to all believers the presence of heavenly goods already possessed here below" (LG 44). In this manner these Christians "give outstanding and striking testimony that the world cannot be transfigured and offered to God without the spirit of the beatitudes" (LG 31).

9. Union with Christ by consecration through profession of the counsels can be lived in the midst of the world, translated in the work of the world, and expressed by means of the world. This is the special vocation of the secular institutes, defined by Pius XII as "consecrated to God and to others" in the world and "by means of the world" (*Primo feliciter*, V and II). Of themselves, the counsels do not necessarily separate people from the world. In fact, it is a gift of God to the Church that consecration through profession of the counsels can take the form of a life to be lived as a hidden leaven. Christians so consecrated continue the work of salvation by communicating the love of Christ through their presence in the world and through its sanctification from within. Their style of life and presence are not distinguished externally from those of their fellow Christians. Their witness is given in their ordinary environment of life. This discreet form of witness flows from the very nature of their secular vocation and is part of the way that their consecration is meant to be lived (cf. PC 11).

10. Such is not the case, however, with those whose consecration by the profession of the counsels constitutes them as religious. The very nature of religious vocation involves a public witness to Christ and to the Church. Religious profession is made by vows which the Church receives as public. A stable form of community life in an institute canonically erected by the competent ecclesiastical authority manifests in a visible way the covenant and communion which religious life expresses. A certain separation from family and from professional life at the time a person enters the novitiate speaks powerfully of the absoluteness of God. At the same time, it is the beginning of a new and deeper bond in Christ with the family that one has left. This bond becomes firmer as detachment from otherwise legitimate relationships, occupations, and forms of relaxation continues to reflect God's absoluteness publicly throughout life. A further aspect of the public nature of religious consecration is that the apostolate of religious is in some sense always corporate. Religious presence is visible, affecting ways of acting, attire, and style of life.

11. Religious consecration is lived within a given institute according to constitutions which the Church, by her authority, accepts and approves. This means that consecration is lived according to specific provisions which manifest and deepen a distinctive identity. The identity derives from that action of the Holy Spirit which is the institute's founding gift and which creates a particular type of spirituality, of life, of apostolate, and of tradition (cf. MR 11). Looking at the numerous religious families, one is struck by the wide variety of founding gifts. The Council laid stress on the need to foster these as so many gifts of God (cf. PC 2b).

They determine the nature, spirit, purpose, and character which form each institute's spiritual patrimony, and they are basic to that sense of identity which is a key element in the fidelity of every religious (cf. ET 51).

12. In the case of institutes dedicated to works of the apostolate, religious consecration has a further note: the participation in Christ's mission is specific and concrete. *Perfectae Caritatis* recalls that the very nature of these institutes requires "apostolic activity and charitable services" (PC 8). By the fact of their consecration, the members are dedicated to God and available to be sent. Their vocation implies the active proclamation of the Gospel through "works of charity that are entrusted to the institute by the Church and are to be performed in her name" (PC 8). For this reason, the apostolic activity of such institutes is not simply a human effort to do good but "an action that is deeply ecclesial" (EN 60). It is rooted in union with the Christ who was sent by the Father to do his work. It expresses a consecration by God which sends the religious to serve Christ in his members in concrete ways (cf. EN 69) corresponding to the founding gift of the institute (cf. MR 15). "The entire religious life of such religious should be imbued with an apostolic spirit, and all their apostolic activity with a religious spirit" (PC 8).

## II.

### CHARACTERISTICS

#### *1. Consecration by public vows*

13. It is proper, though not exclusive, to religious life to profess the evangelical counsels by vows which the Church receives. These are a response to the prior gift of God which, being a gift of love, cannot be rationalized. It is something that God himself works in the person he has chosen.

14. As a response to the gift of God, the vows are a triple expression of a single "yes" to the one relationship of total consecration. They are the act by which the religious "makes himself or herself over to God in a new and special way" (LG 44). By them, the religious gladly dedicates the whole of life to God's service, regarding the following of Christ "as the one thing that is necessary, and seeking God before all else and only him" (PC 5). Two reasons prompt this dedication: first, a desire to be free from hindrances that could prevent the person from loving God ardently and worshipping him perfectly (cf. ET 7); and second, a desire to be consecrated in a more total way to the service of God (cf. LG 44). The vows themselves "show forth the unbreakable bond that exists between Christ and his bride the Church. The more stable and firm these bonds are, the more perfect will the Christian's religious consecration be" (LG 44).

15. The vows themselves are specific: three ways of pledging oneself to live as Christ lived in areas which cover the whole of life: possessions, affections, autonomy. Each emphasizes a relation to Jesus, consecrated and sent. He was rich but became poor for our sakes, emptying himself, and having nowhere to lay his head. He loved with an undivided heart, universally, and to the end. He came to do the will of the Father who sent him, and he did it steadily,

learning obedience through suffering, and becoming a cause of salvation for all who obey.

16. The distinguishing mark of the religious institute is found in the way in which these values of Christ are visibly expressed. For this reason, the content of the vows in each institute, as expressed in its constitutions, must be clear and unambiguous. The religious foregoes the free use and disposal of his or her property, depends through the lawful superior on the institute for the provision of material goods, puts gifts and all salaries in common as belonging to the community, and accepts and contributes to a simple manner of life. He or she undertakes to live chastity by a new title, that of the vow, and to live it in consecrated celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom. This implies a manner of life that is a convincing and credible witness to a total dedication to chastity and which foregoes any behavior, personal relationships, and forms of recreation incompatible with this. The religious is pledged to obey the directives of lawful superiors according to the constitutions of the institute and further accepts a particular obedience to the Holy Father in virtue of the vow of obedience. Implicit in the commitment to the institute which the vows include is the pledge to live a common life in communion with the brothers or sisters of the community. The religious undertakes to live in fidelity to the nature, purpose, spirit and character of the institute as expressed in its constitutions, proper law, and sound traditions. There is also the willing undertaking of a life of radical and continuous conversion as demanded by the Gospel, further specified in the content of each of the vows.

17. Consecration through profession of the evangelical counsels in religious life necessarily inspires a way of living which has a social impact. Social protest is not the purpose of the vows, but there is no doubt that the living of them has always offered a witness to values which challenge society just as they challenge the religious themselves. Religious poverty, chastity, and obedience can speak forcefully and clearly to today's world which is suffering from so much consumerism and discrimination, eroticism and hatred, violence and oppression (cf. RHP 15).

## ***2. Communion in community***

18. Religious consecration establishes a particular communion between religious and God and, in him, between the members of the same institute. This is the basic element in the unity of an institute. A shared tradition, common works, well-considered structures, pooled resources, common constitutions, and a single spirit can all help to build up and strengthen unity. The foundation of unity, however, is the communion in Christ established by the one founding gift. This communion is rooted in religious consecration itself. It is animated by the Gospel spirit, nourished by prayer, distinguished by generous mortification, and characterized by the joy and hope which spring from the fruitfulness of the cross (cf. ET 41).

19. For religious, communion in Christ is expressed in a stable and visible way through community life. So important is community living to religious consecration that every religious, whatever his or her apostolic work, is bound to it by the fact of profession and must normally live under the authority of a local superior in a community of the institute to which he or she belongs. Normally, too, community living entails a daily sharing of life according to specific structures and provisions established in the constitutions. Sharing of prayer, work,

meals, leisure, common spirit, "relationships of friendship, cooperation in the same apostolate, and mutual support in community of life chosen for a better following of Christ, are so many valuable factors in daily progress" (ET 39). A community gathered as a true family in the Lord's name enjoys his presence (cf. *Mt* 18:25) through the love of God which is poured out by the Holy Spirit (cf. *Rm* 5:5). Its unity is a symbol of the coming of Christ and is a source of apostolic energy and power (cf. PC 15). In it the consecrated life can thrive in conditions which are proper to it (cf. ET 38) and the ongoing formation of members can be assured. The capacity to live community life with its joys and restraints is a quality which distinguishes a religious vocation to a given institute and it is a key criterion of suitability in a candidate.

20. The local community, as the place where religious life is primarily lived, has to be organized in a way which makes religious values clear. Its center is the Eucharist in which the members of the community participate daily as far as possible and which is honored by having an oratory where the celebration can take place and where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved (cf. ET 48). Times of prayer together daily, based on the word of God and in union with the prayer of the Church as offered especially in the liturgy of the hours, support community life. So also does an established rhythm of more intense times of prayer on a weekly and monthly basis, and the annual retreat. Frequent reception of the sacrament of reconciliation is also part of religious life. In addition to the personal aspect of God's pardon and his renewing love in the individual, the sacrament builds community by its power of reconciliation and also manifests a special bond with the Church. In accordance with the proper law of the institute, moreover, time is provided for daily private prayer and for good spiritual reading. Ways are found for deepening the devotions particular to the institute itself, especially that to Mary, the Mother of God. The needs of the institute as a whole are kept before the members and there is an affectionate remembrance in prayer of those members who have already been called from this life by the Father. The fostering of these religious values of community life and the ensuring of a suitable organization to promote them is the responsibility of all the members of the community, but in a particular way it is that of the local superior (cf. ET 26).

21. The style of community life itself will relate to the form of apostolate for which the members have responsibility and to the culture and society in which this responsibility is accepted. The form of apostolate may well decide the size and location of a community, its particular needs, its standards of living. But whatever the apostolate, the community will strive to live simply, according to norms established at institute and province level and applied to its own need. It will build into its way of living the asceticism implicit in religious consecration. It will provide for its members according to their needs and its own resources, always bearing in mind its responsibilities towards the institute as a whole and towards the poor.

22. In view of the crucial importance of community life, it should be noted that its quality is affected, positively or negatively, by two kinds of diversity in the institute: that of its members and that of its works. These are the diversities of Saint Paul's image of the Body of Christ or the Council's image of the pilgrim People of God. In both, the diversity is a variety of gifts which is meant to enrich the one reality. The criterion for accepting both members and works in a religious institute, therefore, is the building of unity (cf. MR 12). The practical question is: do God's gifts in this person or project or group make for unity and deepen communion? If they do, they can be welcomed. If they do not, then no matter how good the gifts may seem to

be in themselves or how desirable they may appear to some members, they are not for this particular institute. It is a mistake to try to make the founding gift of the institute cover everything. A gift which would virtually separate a member from the communion of the community cannot be rightly encouraged. Nor is it wise to tolerate widely divergent lines of development which do not have a strong foundation of unity in the institute itself. Diversity without division and unity without regimentation are a richness and a challenge that help the growth of communities of prayer, joy, and service in witness to the reality of Christ. It is a particular responsibility of superiors and of those in charge of formation to ensure that the differences which make for disintegration are not mistaken for the genuine value of diversity.

23. When God consecrates a person, he gives a special gift to achieve his own kind purposes: the reconciliation and salvation of the human race. He not only chooses, sets apart, and dedicates the person to himself, but he engages him or her in his own divine work. Consecration inevitably implies mission. These are two facets of one reality. The choice of a person by God is for the sake of others: the consecrated person is one who is sent to do the work of God in the power of God. Jesus himself was clearly aware of this. Consecrated and sent to bring the salvation of God, he was wholly dedicated to the Father in adoration, love, and surrender, and totally given to the work of the Father, which is the salvation of the world.

24. Religious, by their particular form of consecration, are necessarily and deeply committed to the mission of Christ. Like him, they are called for others: wholly turned in love to the Father and, by that very fact, entirely given to Christ's saving service of their brothers and sisters. This is true of religious life in all its forms. The life of cloistered contemplatives has its own hidden, apostolic fruitfulness (cf. PC 7) and proclaims to all that God exists and that God is love. Religious dedicated to works of the apostolate continue in our time Christ "announcing God's Kingdom to the multitude, healing the sick and the maimed, converting sinners to a good life, blessing children, doing good to all, and always obeying the will of the Father who sent him" (LG 46). This saving work of Christ is shared by means of concrete services mandated by the Church in the approval of the constitutions. The fact of this approval qualifies the kind of service undertaken, since it must be faithful to the Gospel, to the Church, and to the institute. It also establishes certain limits, since the mission of religious is both strengthened and restricted by the consequences of consecration in a particular institute. Further, the nature of religious service determines how the mission is to be done: in a profound union with the Lord and sensitivity to the times which will enable the religious "to transmit the message of the Incarnate Word in terms which the world is able to understand" (ET 9).

25. Whatever may be the works of service by which the word is transmitted, the mission itself is undertaken as a community responsibility. It is to the institute as a whole that the Church commits that sharing in the mission of Christ which characterizes it and which is expressed in works inspired by the founding charism. This corporate mission does not mean that all the members of the institute are doing the same thing or that the gifts and qualities of the individual are not respected. It does mean that the works of all the members are directly related to the common apostolate, which the Church has recognized as expressing concretely the purpose of the institute. This common and constant apostolate is part of the institute's sound traditions. It is so closely related to identity that it cannot be changed without affecting

the character of the institute itself. It is therefore a touchstone of authenticity in the evaluation of new works, whether these services will be done by a group or by individual religious. The integrity of the common apostolate is a particular responsibility of major superiors. They must see that the institute is at once faithful to its traditional mission in the Church and open to new ways of undertaking it. Works need to be renewed and revitalized, but this has to be done always in fidelity to the institute's approved apostolate and in collaboration with the respective ecclesiastical authorities. Such renewal will be marked by the four great loyalties emphasized in the document, *Religious and Human Promotion*: "fidelity to humanity and to our times; fidelity to Christ and the Gospel; fidelity to the Church and its mission in the world; fidelity to religious life and to the charism of the institute" (RHP 13).

26. The individual religious finds his or her personal apostolic work within the ecclesial mission of the institute. Basically it will be a work of evangelization: striving in the Church and according to the mission of the institute to help bring the Good News to "all the strata of humanity and through it to transform humanity itself from within" (EN 18; RHP Intro.). In practice, it will involve some form of service in keeping with the purpose of the institute and usually undertaken with brothers or sisters of the same religious family. In the case of some clerical or missionary institutes, it may sometimes involve working alone. In the case of other institutes, working alone is with the permission of superiors to meet an exceptional need for a certain time. At the end of life, the apostolate will be for many a mission of prayer and suffering only. But at whatever stage, the apostolic work of the individual is that of a religious sent in communion with an ecclesially missioned institute. Such work has its source in religious obedience (cf. PC 8, 5c, 10). Therefore, it is distinct in its character from those apostolates proper to the laity (cf. RHP 22; AA 2, 7, 13, 25). It is by their obedience in their corporate and ecclesial works of evangelization that religious manifest one of the most important aspects of their lives. They are genuinely apostolic, not because they have an "apostolate," but because they are living as the apostles lived: following Christ in service and in communion according to the teaching of the Gospel in the Church he founded.

27. There is no doubt that, in many areas of the world at the present time, religious institutes dedicated to apostolic works are facing difficult and delicate questions with respect to the apostolate. The reduced number of religious, the fewer young persons entering, the rising median age, the social pressures from contemporary movements are coinciding with an awareness of a wider range of needs, a more individual approach to personal development, and a higher level of awareness with regard to issues of justice, peace, and human promotion. There is a temptation to want to do everything. There is also a temptation to leave works which are stable and a genuine expression of the institute's charism for others which seem more immediately relevant to social needs but which are less expressive of the institute's identity. There is a third temptation to scatter the resources of an institute in a diversity of short-term activities only loosely connected with the founding gift. In all these instances, the effects are not immediate but, in the long run, what will suffer is the unity and identity of the institute itself, and this will be a loss to the Church and to its mission.

#### **4. Prayer**

28. Religious life cannot be sustained without a deep life of prayer, individual, communal, and

liturgical. The religious who embraces concretely a life of total consecration is called to know the risen Lord by a warm, personal knowledge, and to know him as one with whom he or she is personally in communion: "This is eternal life: to *know* the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent" (*Jn* 17:3). Knowledge of him in faith brings love: "You did not see him, yet you love him; and still without seeing him you are already filled with a joy so glorious that it cannot be described" (*I Pet* 1:8). This joy of love and knowledge is brought about in many ways, but fundamentally, and as an essential and necessary means, through individual and community encounter with God in prayer. This is where the religious finds "the concentration of the heart on God" (CDm 1), which unifies the whole of life and mission.

29. As with Jesus for whom prayer as a distinct act held a large and essential place in life, the religious needs to pray as a deepening of union with God (cf. *Lk* 5:16). Prayer is also a necessary condition for proclaiming the Gospel (cf. *Mk* 1:35-38). It is the context of all important decisions and events (cf. *Lk* 6:12-13). As with Jesus, too, the habit of prayer is necessary if the religious is to have that contemplative vision of things by which God is revealed in faith in the ordinary events of life (cf. CDm 1). This is the contemplative dimension which the Church and the world have the right to expect of religious by the fact of their consecration. It must be strengthened by prolonged moments of time apart for exclusive adoration of the Father, love of him and listening in silence before him. For this reason, Paul VI insisted: "Faithfulness to daily prayer always remains for each religious a basic necessity. Prayer must have a primary place in your constitutions and in your lives" (ET 45).

30. By saying "in your constitutions," Paul VI gave a reminder that for the religious prayer is not only a personal turning in love to God but also a community response of adoration, intercession, praise, and thanksgiving that needs to be provided for in a stable way (cf. ET 43). This does not happen by chance. Concrete provisions at the level of each institute and of each province and local community are necessary if prayer is to deepen and thrive in religious life individually and communally. Yet only through prayer is the religious ultimately able to respond to his or her consecration. Community prayer has an important role in giving this necessary spiritual support. Each religious has a right to be assisted by the presence and example of other members of the community at prayer. Each has the privilege and duty of praying with the others and of participating with them in the liturgy which is the unifying center of their life. Such mutual help encourages the effort to live the life of union with the Lord to which religious are called. "People have to feel that through you someone else is at work. To the extent that you live your total consecration to the Lord, you communicate something of him and, ultimately, it is he for whom the human heart is longing" (Pope John Paul II, Altötting).

### **5. Asceticism**

31. The discipline and silence necessary for prayer are a reminder that consecration by the vows of religion requires a certain asceticism of life "embracing the whole being" (ET 46). Christ's response of poverty, love, and obedience led him to the solitude of the desert, the pain of contradiction, and the abandonment of the cross. The consecration of religious enters into this way of his; it cannot be a reflection of his consecration if its expression in life does not hold an element of self-denial. Religious life itself is an ongoing, public, visible expression of

Christian conversion. It calls for the leaving of all things and the taking up of one's cross to follow Christ throughout the whole of life. This involves the asceticism necessary to live in poverty of spirit and of fact; to love as Christ loves; to give up one's own will for God's sake to the will of another who represents him, however imperfectly. It calls for the self-giving without which it is not possible to live either a good community life or a fruitful mission. Jesus' statement that the grain of wheat needs to fall to the ground and die if it is to bear fruit has a particular application to religious because of the public nature of their profession. It is true that much of today's penance is to be found in the circumstances of life and should be accepted there. However, unless religious build into their lives "a joyful, well-balanced austerity" (ET 30) and deliberately determined renunciations, they risk losing the spiritual freedom necessary for living the counsels. Indeed, without such austerity and renunciation, their consecration itself can be affected. This is because there cannot be a public witness to Christ poor, chaste, and obedient without asceticism. Moreover, by professing the counsels by vows, religious undertake to do all that is necessary to deepen and foster what they have vowed, and this means a free choice of the cross, that it may be "as it was for Christ, proof of the greatest love" (ET 29).

## **6. Public witness**

32. Of its nature, religious life is a witness that should clearly manifest the primacy of the love of God and do so with a strength coming from the Holy Spirit (cf. ET 1). Jesus himself did this supremely: witnessing to the Father "with the power of the Spirit in him" (*Lk* 4:14) in his living, dying, rising, and remaining for ever the faithful witness. In his turn he sent his apostles in the power of the same Spirit to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and indeed to the ends of the earth (cf. *Acts* 1:8). The subject of their testimony was always the same: "Something which has existed since the beginning, that we have heard, and we have seen with our own eyes; that we have watched and touched with our hands: the Word, who is life" (*I Jn* 1:1): Jesus Christ "the Son of God, proclaimed in all his power through his resurrection from the dead" (*Rm* 1: 5).

33. Religious, too, in their own times, are called to bear witness to a similar, deep, personal experience of Christ and also to share the faith, hope, love and joy which that experience goes on inspiring. Their continuous individual renewal of life should be a source of new growth in the institutes to which they belong, recalling the words of Pope John Paul II: "What counts most is not what religious do, but what they are as persons consecrated to the Lord" (Message to the Plenary Assembly of the SCRIS, March 1980). Not only directly in works of announcing the Gospel but even more forcefully in the very way that they live, they should be voices that affirm with confidence and conviction: We have seen the Lord. He is risen. We have heard his word.

34. The totality of religious consecration requires that the witness to the Gospel be given publicly by the whole of life. Values, attitudes and life-style attest forcefully to the place of Christ in one's life. The visibility of this witness involves the foregoing of standards of comfort and convenience that would otherwise be legitimate. It requires a restraint on forms of relaxation and entertainment (cf. ES 1, §2; CD 33-35). To ensure this public witness, religious willingly accept a pattern of life that is not permissive but largely laid down for them. They

wear a religious garb that distinguishes them as consecrated persons, and they have a place of residence which is properly established by their institute in accordance with common law and their own constitutions. Such matters as travel and social contacts are in accord with the spirit and character of their institute and with religious obedience. These provisions alone do not ensure the desired public witness to the joy, hope, and love of Jesus Christ, but they offer important means to it, and it is certain that religious witness is not given without them.

35. The way of working, too, is important for public witness. What is done and how it is done should both proclaim Christ from the poverty of someone who is not seeking his or her own fulfillment and satisfaction. In our age powerlessness is one of the great poverties. The religious accepts to share this intimately by the generosity of his or her obedience, thereby becoming one with the poor and powerless in a particular way, as Christ was in his Passion. Such a person knows what it is to stand in need before God, to love as Jesus does, and to work at God's plan on God's terms. Moreover, in fidelity to religious consecration, he or she lives the institute's concrete provisions for promoting these attitudes.

36. Fidelity to the mandated apostolate of one's own religious institute is also essential for true witness. Individual dedication to perceived needs at the expense of the mandated works of the institute can only be damaging. However, there are ways of living and working which witness to Christ very clearly in the contemporary situation. The constant evaluation of use of goods and of style of relationships in one's own life is one of the religious' most effective ways of promoting the justice of Christ at the present time (cf. RHP 4e). Being a voice for those who are unable to speak for themselves is a further mode of religious witness, when it is done in accordance with the directives of the local hierarchy and the proper law of the institute. The drama of the refugees, of those persecuted for political or religious beliefs (cf. EN 39), of those denied the right to birth and life, of unjustified restrictions of human freedom, of social inadequacy that causes suffering in the old, the sick, and the marginalized: these are present continuations of the Passion which call particularly to religious who are dedicated to apostolic works (cf. RHP 4d).

37. The response will vary according to the mission, tradition and identity of each institute. Some may need to seek approval for new missions in the Church. In other cases, new institutes may be recognized to meet specific needs. In most cases, the creative use of well-established works to meet new challenges will be a clear witness to Christ yesterday, today, and for ever. The witness of religious who, in loyalty to the Church and to the tradition of their institute, strive courageously and with love for the defense of human rights and for the coming of the Kingdom in the social order can be a clear echo of the Gospel and the voice of the Church (cf. RHP 3). It is so, however, to the extent that it manifests publicly the transforming power of Christ in the Church and the vitality of the institute's charism to the people of our time. Finally, perseverance, which is a further gift of the God of the covenant, is the unspoken but eloquent witness of the religious to the faithful God whose love is without end.

## ***7. Relation to the Church***

38. Religious life has its own place in relation to the divine and hierarchical structure of the Church. It is not a kind of intermediate way between the clerical and lay conditions of life, but

comes from both as a special gift for the entire Church (cf. LG 43; MR 10). In particular, by being an outward, social sign of the mystery of God's consecrating action throughout life, and by being this through the mediation of the Church for the good of the entire Body, the religious life in a special way participates in the sacramental nature of the People of God. This is because it is itself a part of the Church as mystery and as social reality, and it cannot exist without both these aspects.

39. It was this dual reality that the Second Vatican Council underscored in insisting on the sacramental nature of the Church: at once necessarily a mystery, invisible, a divine communion in the new life of the Spirit; and equally necessarily a social reality, visible, a human community under one who represents Christ the head. As mystery (cf. LG 1), the Church is the new creation, vivified by the Spirit and assembled in Christ to come with confidence to the Father's throne of grace (cf. *Heb* 4:16). As social reality, she presupposes the historical initiative of Jesus Christ, his paschal going to the Father, his objective headship of the Church he founded and the hierarchic character which proceeds from that headship: from his setting up of a variety of ministries which aim at the good of the whole Body (cf. LG 18; cf. MR 1-5). The twofold aspect of "visible social organism and invisible divine presence intimately united" (MR 3) is what gives the Church "her special sacramental nature by virtue of which she is the visible sacrament of saving unity" (LG 9). She is both subject and object of faith essentially transcending the parameters of any purely sociological perspective even while she renews her human structures in the light of historical evolutions and cultural changes (cf. MR 3). Her very nature makes her at once "universal sacrament of salvation" (LG 48): a visible sign of the mystery of God, and hierarchical reality: a concrete divine provision by which that sign can be authenticated and made efficacious.

40. The religious life touches both aspects. The founders and foundresses of religious institutes ask the hierarchical Church publicly to authenticate the gift of God on which the existence of their institute depends. By doing so, the founders and those who follow them also give witness to the mystery of the Church, because each institute exists in order to build up the Body of Christ in the unity of its diverse functions and activities.

41. In their origins, religious institutes depend in a unique way on the hierarchy. The bishops in communion with the successor of Peter form a college that jointly shows forth and carries out in the Church-sacrament the functions of Christ the head (cf. MR 6; LG 21; PO 1, 2; CD 2). They have not only the pastoral charge of fostering the life of Christ in the faithful, but also the duty of verifying gifts and competencies. They are responsible for coordinating the Church's energies and for guiding the entire people in living in the world as a sign and instrument of salvation. They therefore have in a special way the ministry of discernment with regard to the manifold gifts and initiatives among God's people. As a particularly rich and important example of these manifold gifts, each religious institute depends for the authentic discernment of its founding charism on the God-given ministry of the hierarchy.

42. This relationship obtains not only for the first recognition of a religious institute but also for its ongoing development. The Church does more than bring an institute into being. She accompanies, guides, corrects, and encourages it in its fidelity to its founding gift (cf. LG 45) for it is a living element in her own life and growth. She receives the vows made in the

institute as vows of religion with ecclesial consequences, involving a consecration made by God himself through her mediation (cf. MR 8). She gives to the institute a public sharing in her own mission, both concrete and corporate (cf. LG 17; AG 40). She confers on the institute, in accordance with her own common law and with the constitutions that she has approved, the religious authority necessary for the life of vowed obedience. In short, the Church continues to mediate the consecratory action of God in a specific way, recognizing and fostering this particular form of consecrated life.

43. In daily practice, this ongoing relation of religious to the Church is most often worked out at diocesan or local level. The document *Mutuae Relationes* is entirely devoted to this theme from the point of view of present-day application. Suffice it to say here that the life and mission of the People of God are one. They are fostered by all according to the specific roles and functions of each. The unique service rendered by religious to this life and mission lies in the total and public nature of their vowed Christian living, according to a community founding gift approved by ecclesiastical authority.

### **8. Formation**

44. Religious formation fosters growth in the life of consecration to the Lord from the earliest stages, when a person first becomes seriously interested in undertaking it, to its final consummation, when the religious meets the Lord definitively in death. The religious lives a particular form of life, and life itself is in constant ongoing development. It does not stand still. Nor is the religious simply called and consecrated once. The call of God and the consecration by him continue throughout life, capable of growing and deepening in ways beyond our understanding. The discernment of the capacity to live a life that will foster this growth according to the spiritual patrimony and provisions of a given institute, and the accompanying of the life itself in its personal evolution in each member in community, are the two main facets of formation.

45. For each religious, formation is the process of becoming more and more a disciple of Christ, growing in union with and in configuration to him. It is a matter of taking on increasingly the mind of Christ, of sharing more deeply his gift of himself to the Father and his brotherly service of the human family, and of doing this according to the founding gift which mediates the Gospel to the members of a given religious institute. Such a process requires a genuine conversion. "Putting on Jesus Christ" (cf. *Rm* 13:14, *Gal* 3:27, *Eph* 4:24) implies the stripping off of selfishness and egoism (cf. *Eph* 4:22-24, *Col* 3:9-10). The very fact of "walking henceforth according to the Spirit" means giving up "the desires of the flesh" (*Gal* 5:16). The religious professes to make this putting on of Christ, in his poverty, his love, and his obedience, the essential pursuit of life. It is a pursuit which never ends. There is a constant maturing in it, and this reaches not only to spiritual values but also to those which contribute psychologically, culturally, and socially to the fullness of the human personality. As the religious grows toward the fullness of Christ according to his or her state of life, there is a verification of the statement in *Lumen Gentium*: "While the profession of the evangelical counsels involves the renunciation of goods that undoubtedly deserve to be highly valued, it does not constitute an obstacle to the true development of the human person, but by its nature

is extremely beneficial to that development" (LG 46).

46. The ongoing configuration to Christ comes about according to the charism and provisions of the institute to which the religious belongs. Each has its own spirit, character, purpose, and tradition, and it is in accordance with these that the religious grow in their union with Christ. For religious institutes dedicated to works of the apostolate, formation includes the preparation and continual updating of the members to undertake the works proper to their institute, not simply as professionals, but as "living witnesses to love without limit and to the Lord Jesus" (ET 53). Accepted as a matter of personal responsibility by each religious, formation becomes not only an individual personal growth but also a blessing to the community and a source of fruitful energy for the apostolate.

47. Since the initiative for religious consecration is in the call of God, it follows that God himself, working through the Holy Spirit of Jesus, is the first and principal agent in the formation of the religious. He acts through his word and sacraments, through the prayer of the liturgy, the magisterium of the Church and, more immediately, through those who are called in obedience to help the formation of their brothers and sisters in a more special way. Responding to God's grace and guidance, the religious accepts in love the responsibility for personal formation and growth, welcoming the consequences of this response which are unique to each person and always unpredictable. The response, however, is not made in isolation. Following the tradition of the early fathers of the desert and of all the great religious founders in the matter of provision for spiritual guidance, religious institutes each have members who are particularly qualified and appointed to help their sisters and brothers in this matter. Their role varies according to the stage reached by the religious but its main responsibilities are: discernment of God's action; the accompaniment of the religious in the ways of God; the nourishing of life with solid doctrine and the practice of prayer; and, particularly in the first stages, the evaluation of the journey thus far made. The director of novices and the religious responsible for those in first profession have also the task of verifying whether the young religious have the call and capacity for first and for final profession. The whole process, at whatever stage, takes place in community. A prayerful and dedicated community, building its union in Christ and sharing his mission together, is a natural milieu of formation. It will be faithful to the traditions and constitutions of the institute, and be well inserted in the institute as a whole, in the Church and in the society it serves. It will support its members and keep before them in faith during the whole of their lives the goal and values which their consecration implies.

48. Formation is not achieved all at once. The journey from the first to the final response falls broadly into five phases: the pre-novitiate, in which the genuineness of the call is identified as far as possible; the novitiate, which is initiation into a new form of life; first profession and the period of maturing prior to perpetual profession; perpetual profession and the ongoing formation of the mature years; and finally the time of diminishment, in whatever way this comes, which is a preparation for the definitive meeting with the Lord. Each of these phases has its own goal, content, and particular provisions. The stages of novitiate and profession especially, because of their importance, are carefully determined in their main lines by the Church in her common law. All the same, much is left to the responsibility of individual institutes. These are asked to give details concretely in their constitutions for a considerable

number of the provisions to which common law refers in principle.

## **9. Government**

49. The government of apostolic religious, like all the other aspects of their life, is based on faith and on the reality of their consecrated response to God in community and mission. These women and men are members of religious institutes whose structures reflect the Christian hierarchy of which the head is Christ himself. They have chosen to live vowed obedience as a value in life. They therefore require a form of government that expresses these values and a particular form of religious authority. Such authority, which is particular to religious institutes, does not derive from the members themselves. It is conferred by the Church at the time of establishing each institute and by the approving of its constitutions. It is an authority invested in superiors for the duration of their term of service at general, intermediate, or local level. It is to be exercised according to the norms of common and proper law in a spirit of service, reverencing the human person of each religious as a child of God (cf. PC 14), fostering cooperation for the good of the institute, but always preserving the superior's final right of discerning and deciding what is to be done (cf. ET 25). Strictly speaking, this religious authority is not shared. It may be delegated according to the constitutions for particular purposes but it is normally *ex officio* and is invested in the person of the superior.

50. Superiors do not exercise authority in isolation, however. Each must have the assistance of a council whose members collaborate with the superior according to norms that are constitutionally established. Councilors do not exercise authority by right of office as superiors do, but they collaborate with the superior and help by their consultative or deliberative vote according to ecclesiastical law and the constitutions of the institute.

51. Supreme authority in an institute is also exercised, though in an extraordinary manner, by a general chapter while it is in session. This again is according to the constitutions, which should designate the authority of the chapter in such a way that it is quite distinct from that of the superior general. The general chapter is essentially an *ad hoc* body. It is composed of *ex officio* members and elected delegates who ordinarily meet together for one chapter only. As a sign of unity in charity, the celebration of a general chapter should be a moment of grace and of the action of the Holy Spirit in an institute. It should be a joyful, paschal, and ecclesial experience which benefits the institute itself and also the whole Church. The general chapter is meant to renew and protect the spiritual patrimony of the institute as well as elect the highest superior and councilors, conduct major matters of business, and issue norms for the whole institute. Chapters are of such importance that the proper law of the institute has to determine accurately what pertains to them whether at general or at other levels: that is, their nature, authority, composition, mode of proceeding and frequency of celebration.

52. Conciliar and post-conciliar teaching insists on certain principles with regard to religious government which have given rise to considerable changes during the past twenty years. It laid down clearly the basic need for effective, personal, religious authority at all levels, general, intermediate, and local, if religious obedience is to be lived (cf. PC 14; ET 25). It further underlined the need for consultation, for appropriate involvement of the members in the government of the institute, for shared responsibility, and for subsidiarity (cf. ES II, 18).

Most of these principles have by now found their way into revised constitutions. It is important that they be so understood and implemented as to fulfill the purpose of religious government: the building of a united community in Christ in which God is sought and loved before all things, and the mission of Christ is generously accomplished.

### ***Mary, joy and hope of religious life***

53. It is especially in Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church, that religious life comes to understand itself most deeply and finds its sign of certain hope (cf. LG 68). She, who was conceived immaculate because she was called from among God's people to bear God himself most intimately and to give him to the world, was consecrated totally by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. She was the Ark of the new covenant itself. The handmaid of the Lord in the poverty of the anawim, the Mother of fair love from Bethlehem to Calvary and beyond, the obedient Virgin whose "yes" to God changed our history, the missionary hurrying to Hebron, the one who was sensitive to needs at Cana, the steadfast witness at the foot of the cross, the center of unity which held the young Church together in its expectation of the Holy Spirit, Mary showed throughout her life all those values to which religious consecration is directed. She is the Mother of religious in being Mother of him who was consecrated and sent, and in her *fiat* and *magnificat* religious life finds the totality of its surrender to and the thrill of its joy in the consecratory action of God.

## **III.**

### **SOME FUNDAMENTAL NORMS**

The revised Code of Canon Law transcribes into canonical norms the rich conciliar and post-conciliar teaching of the Church on religious life. Together with the documents of the Second Vatican Council and the pronouncements of successive Popes in recent years, it gives the basis on which current Church praxis regarding religious life is founded. The natural evolution necessary for ordinary living will always continue, but the period of special experimentation for religious institutes, as provided by the *motu proprio Ecclesiae Sanctae* II, ended with the celebration of the second ordinary general chapter after the special chapter of renewal. Now the revised Code of Canon Law is the Church's juridical foundation for religious life, both in its evaluation of the experience of experimentation and its looking to the future. The following fundamental norms contain a comprehensive synthesis of the Church's provisions.

#### ***I. Call and consecration***

§1. Religious life is a form of life to which some Christians, both clerical and lay, are freely called by God so that they may enjoy a special gift of grace in the life of the Church and may contribute each in his or her own way to the saving mission of the Church (cf. LG 43).

§2. The gift of religious vocation is rooted in the gift of baptism but is not given to all the baptized. It is freely given and unmerited: offered by God to those whom he chooses freely from among his people and for the sake of his people (cf. PC 5).

§3. In accepting God's gift of vocation, religious respond to a divine call: dying to sin (cf. *Rm* 6:11), renouncing the world, and living for God alone. Their whole lives are dedicated to his service and they seek and love above all else "God who has first loved us" (cf. *I Jn* 4:10; cf. PC 5, 6). The focus of their lives is the closer following of Christ (cf. ET 7).

§4. The dedication of the whole life of the religious to God's service constitutes a special consecration (cf. PC 5). It is a consecration of the whole person which manifests in the Church a marriage effected by God, a sign of the future life. This consecration is by public vows, perpetual or temporary, the latter renewable on expiry. By their vows, religious assume the observance of the three evangelical counsels; they are consecrated to God through the ministry of the Church (can. 607, 654), and they are incorporated into their institute with the rights and duties defined by law.

§5. The conditions for validity of temporary profession, the length of this period and its possible extension are determined in the constitutions of each institute, always in conformity with the common law of the Church (can. 655-658).

§6. Religious profession is made according to the formula of vows approved by the Holy See for each institute. The formula is common because all members undertake the same obligations and, when fully incorporated, have the same rights and duties. The individual religious may add an introduction and/or conclusion, if this is approved by competent authority.

§7. Considering its character and the ends proper to it, every institute should define in its constitutions the way in which the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience are to be observed in its own particular way of life (can. 598.1).

## ***II. Community***

§8. Community life, which is one of the marks of a religious institute (can. 607.2), is proper to each religious family. It gathers all the members together in Christ and should be so defined that it becomes a source of mutual aid to all, while helping to fulfill the religious vocation of each (can. 602). It should offer an example of reconciliation in Christ, and of the communion that is rooted and founded in his love.

§9. For religious, community life is lived in a house lawfully erected under the authority of a superior designated by law (can. 608). Such a house is erected with the written approval of the diocesan bishop (can. 609) and should be able to provide suitably for the necessities of its members (can. 610.2), enabling community life to expand and develop with that understanding cordiality which nourishes hope (cf. ET 39).

§10. The individual house should have at least an oratory in which the Eucharist may be celebrated and is reserved so that it is truly the center of the community (can. 608).

§11. In all religious houses according to the character and mission of the institute and according to the specifications of its proper law, some part should be reserved to the members

alone (can. 667.1). This form of separation from the world, which is proper to the purpose of each institute, is part of the public witness which religious give to Christ and to the Church (cf. can. 607.3). It is also needed for the silence and recollection which foster prayer.

§12. Religious should live in their own religious house, observing a common life. They should not live alone without serious reason, and should not do so if there is a community of their institute reasonably near. If, however, there is a question of prolonged absence, the major superior with the consent of his or her council, may permit a religious to live outside the houses of the institute for a just cause, within the limits of common law (can. 665.1).

### ***III. Identity***

§13. Religious should regard the following of Christ proposed in the Gospel and expressed in the constitutions of their institute as the supreme rule of life (can. 662).

§14. The nature, end, spirit, and character of the institute, as established by the founder or foundress and approved by the Church, should be preserved by all, together with the institute's sound traditions (can. 578).

§15. To safeguard the proper vocation and identity of the individual institutes, the constitutions of each must provide fundamental norms concerning the government of the institute, the rule of life for its members, their incorporation and formation, and the proper object of the vows (can. 587). This is in addition to the matters referred to in III §14.

§16. The constitutions are approved by competent ecclesiastical authority. For diocesan institutes, this is the local Ordinary; for pontifical institutes; the Holy See. Subsequent modifications and authentic interpretations are also reserved to the same authority (can. 576, 587.2).

§17. By their religious profession, the members of an institute bind themselves to observe the constitutions faithfully and with love, for they recognize in them the way of life approved by the Church for the institute and the authentic expression of its spirit, tradition, and law.

### ***IV. Chastity***

§18. The evangelical counsel of chastity embraced for the Kingdom of heaven is a sign of the future life and a source of abundant fruitfulness in an undivided heart. It carries with it the obligation of perfect continence in celibacy (can. 599).

§19. Discretion should be used in all things that could be dangerous to the chastity of a consecrated person (cf. PC 12; can. 666).

### ***V. Poverty***

§20. The evangelical counsel of poverty in imitation of Christ calls for a life poor in fact and in spirit, subject to work and led in frugality and detachment from material possessions. Its

profession by vow for the religious involves dependence and limitation in the use and disposition of temporalities according to the norms of the proper law of the institute (can. 600).

§21. By the vow of poverty, religious give up the free use and disposal of goods having material value. Before first profession, they cede the administration of their goods to whomsoever they wish and, unless the constitutions determine otherwise, they freely dispose of their use and usufruct (can. 668). Whatever the religious acquires by personal industry, by gift, or as a religious, is acquired for the institute; whatever is acquired by way of pension, subsidy, or insurance is also acquired for the institute unless the proper law states otherwise (can. 668.3).

## ***VI. Obedience***

§22. The evangelical counsel of obedience, lived in faith, is a loving following of Christ who was obedient unto death.

§23. By their vow of obedience, religious undertake to submit their will to legitimate superiors (can. 601) according to the constitutions. The constitutions themselves state who may give a formal command of obedience and in what circumstances.

§24. Religious institutes are subject to the supreme authority of the Church in a particular manner (can. 590.1). All religious are obliged to obey the Holy Father as their highest superior in virtue of the vow of obedience (can. 590.2).

§25. Religious may not accept duties and offices outside their own institute without the permission of a lawful superior (can. 671). Like clerics, they may not accept public offices which involve the exercise of civil power (can. 285.3; cf. also can. 672 with the additional canons to which it refers).

## ***VII. Prayer and asceticism***

§26. The first and principal duty of religious is assiduous union with God in prayer. They participate in the Eucharistic sacrifice daily insofar as possible and approach the sacrament of penance frequently. The reading of Sacred Scripture, time for mental prayer, the worthy celebration of the liturgy of the hours according to the prescriptions of proper law, devotion to the Blessed Virgin, and a special time for annual retreat are all part of the prayer of religious (can. 663, 664, 1174).

§27. Prayer should be both individual and communitarian.

§28. A generous asceticism is constantly needed for daily conversion to the Gospel (cf. Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution *Paenitemini*, 17 February 1966, II-III, 1, c). For this reason, religious communities must not only be prayerful groups but also ascetical communities in the Church. In addition to being internal and personal, penance must also be external and

communal (cf. CDm 14; cf. SC 110).

### ***VIII. Apostolate***

§29. The apostolate of all religious consists first in the witness of their consecrated life which they are bound to foster by prayer and penance (can. 673).

§30. In institutes dedicated to works of the apostolate, apostolic action is of their very nature. The life of the members should be imbued with an apostolic spirit, and all apostolic activity should be imbued with the religious spirit (can. 675.1).

§31. The essential mission of those religious undertaking apostolic works is the proclaiming of the word of God to those whom he places along their path, so as to lead them towards faith. Such a grace requires a profound union with the Lord, one which enables the religious to transmit the message of the Incarnate Word in terms which today's world is able to understand (cf. ET 9).

§32. Apostolic action is carried out in communion with the Church, and in the name and by the mandate of the Church (can. 675.3).

§33. Superiors and members should faithfully retain the mission and works proper to the institute. They should accommodate them with prudence to the needs of times and places (can. 677.1).

§34. In apostolic relations with bishops, religious are bound by canons 678-683. They have the special obligation of being attentive to the magisterium of the hierarchy and of facilitating for the bishops the exercise of the ministry of teaching, and witnessing authentically to divine truth (cf. MR 33; cf. LG 25).

### ***IX. Witness***

§35. The witness of religious is public. This public witness to Christ and to the Church implies separation from the world according to the character and purpose of each institute (can. 607.3).

§36. Religious institutes should strive to render a quasi-collective witness of charity and poverty (can. 640).

§37. Religious should wear the religious garb of the institute, described in their proper law, as a sign of consecration and a witness of poverty (can. 669.1).

### ***X. Formation***

§38. No one may be admitted to religious life without suitable preparation (can. 597.3).

§39. Conditions for validity of admission, for validity of novitiate, and for temporary and

perpetual profession are indicated in the common law of the Church and the proper law of each institute (can. 641-658). So also are provisions for the place, time, program and guidance of the novitiate and the requirements for the director of novices.

§40. The length of time of formation between first and perpetual vows is stated in the constitutions in accordance with common law (can. 655).

§41. Throughout their entire life, religious should continue their spiritual, doctrinal and practical formation, taking advantage of the opportunities and time provided by superiors for this (can. 661).

## ***XI. Government***

§42. It belongs to the competent ecclesiastical authority to constitute stable forms of living by canonical approval (can. 576). To this authority are also reserved aggregations (can. 580) and the approval of constitutions (can. 587.2). Mergers, unions, federations, confederations, suppressions, and the changing of anything already approved by the Holy See, are reserved to that See (can. 582-584).

§43. Authority to govern in religious institutes is invested in superiors who should exercise it according to the norms of common and proper law (can. 617). This authority is received from God through the ministry of the Church (can. 618). The authority of a superior at whatever level is personal and may not be taken over by a group. For a particular time and for a given purpose, it may be delegated to a designated person.

§44. Superiors should fulfill their office generously, building with their brothers or sisters a community in Christ in which God is sought and loved before everything. In their role of service, superiors have the particular duty of governing in accordance with the constitutions of their institute and of promoting the holiness of its members. In their person, superiors should be examples of fidelity to the magisterium of the Church and to the law and tradition of their institute. They should also foster the consecrated lives of their religious by their care and correction, their support and their patience (cf. can. 619).

§45. Conditions for appointment or election, the length of term of office for the various superiors, and the mode of canonical election for the superior general are stated in the constitutions according to common law (can. 623-625).

§46. Superiors must each have their own council, which assists them in fulfilling their responsibility. In addition to cases prescribed in the common law, proper law determines those cases in which the superior must obtain the consent or the advice of the council for validity of action (can. 627.1 and 627.2).

§47. The general chapter should be a true sign of the unity in charity of the institute. It represents the entire institute and when in session exercises supreme authority in accordance with common law and the norms of the constitutions (can. 631). The general chapter is not a permanent body; its composition, frequency, and functions are stated in the constitutions (can.

631.2). A general chapter may not modify its own composition but it may propose modifications for the composition of future chapters. Such modifications require the approval of the competent ecclesiastical authority. The general chapter may modify those elements of proper law which are not subject to the authority of the Church.

§48. Chapters should not be convoked so frequently as to interfere with the good functioning of the ordinary authority of the major superior. The nature, authority, composition, mode of procedure and frequency of meeting of chapters and of similar assemblies of the institute are determined exactly by proper law (can. 632). In practice, the main elements of these should be in the constitutions.

§49. Provision for temporal goods (can. 634-640) and their administration as well as norms concerning the separation of members from the institute by transfer, departure, or dismissal (can. 684-704) are also found in the common law of the Church and must be included, even if only in brief, in the constitutions.

## **CONCLUSION**

These norms, based on traditional teaching, the revised Code of Canon Law and current praxis, do not exhaust the Church's provision for religious life. They indicate, however, her genuine concern that the life lived by institutes dedicated to works of the apostolate should develop ever more richly as a gift of God to the Church and to the human family. In drawing up this text, which the Holy Father has approved, the Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes wishes to help those institutes to assimilate the Church's revised provision for them and to put it in its doctrinal context. May they find in it a firm encouragement to the closer following of Christ in hope and joy in their consecrated lives.

*From the Vatican, on the Feast of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 31 May 1983.*

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**ABBREVIATIONS**

AA *Apostolicam Actuositatem*

AG *Ad Gentes*

CD *Christus Dominus*

CDm The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life

EN *Evangelii Nuntiandi*

ES *Ecclesiae Sanctae*

ET *Evangelica Testificatio*

LG *Lumen Gentium*

MR *Mutuae Relationes*

OT *Optatam Totius*

PC *Perfectae Caritatis*

RHP Religious and Human Promotion

SC *Sacrosanctum Concilium*