



CONGREGATIO  
PRO INSTITUTIS VITAE CONSECRATAE  
ET SOCIETATIBUS VITAE APOSTOLICAE

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Prot. n. Sp.R. 2452/20

Vatican City, 1 July 2020

To General Moderators,

As a result of the COVID 19 pandemic, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life has received many requests for clarification regarding the possibility of using means of telecommunications for sharing between members of a "coetus personarum" ad *mentem* in the sense of can. 627 and with the inclusion of references to cann. 127 and 166. The same request was formulated by some Institutes and Societies in relation to General Chapters (cf. can. 631).

In order to contain the spread of this pandemic, national legislation has adopted restrictive measures regarding rail, air, sea and, in some cases even, road travel. In many cases, this has resulted in the impossibility of travel by members of the General / Provincial Councils or similar bodies. Councilors, being unable to comply with the *personal presence* as prescribed by can. 166§1, due to restrictions on movement, are prevented from offering their proper collaboration to the Major Superior.

1. The Holy Father, during the audience of June 30 of this year (Prot. n. Sp. R. 2452/20), has granted the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life an "extraordinary faculty", approved in specific form which authorizes the Dicastery to dispense for individual cases, the physical presence of councilors according to the prescriptions of can. 166 §1. In this way, the above mentioned difficulties which would have prevented the presence of the members of the Council at the meeting location are eliminated.

2. A meeting using telecommunications, of the Major Superior with his/her Council is not an ordinary solution for the governance of an Institute or a Province. In fact, once the state of emergency caused by the COVID 19 pandemic is resolved, *habitual* recourse to telecommunications would render meaningless the service of authority which, in consecrated life, calls for personally and responsibly maintaining a network of relationships through correct and effective communication in order to safeguard and promote communion in the Institute.

3. The Major Superior, when in the exercise of his/her office is obliged to make use of the work of the Council (cf. can. 627§1), will submit a request to the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life to use telecommunications for a formal meeting with the Council. In this case, the minutes are drawn up as customary.

4. The Dicastery, having carefully considered the reasons for the requests already received, has decided upon the following:

- that in the use of connection systems, confidentiality and, in the case of required secrecy, both must be ensured (cf. can. 127);

- the identity of the participants in the telecommunication meeting must be verified;

- the possibility of intervening in real time during the deliberations must be ensured.

The use of telecommunications is based on trust and calls for everyone's sense of responsibility so that technology can serve discernment and sound governance.

5. Synodality, in the particular or specific form of chapter collegiality, is at the heart of the work of renewal of the ICL-SAL promoted by the Second Vatican Council and indicates a specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of consecrated persons within the Church, the People of God. Synodality manifests and concretely realizes being in communion, in walking together, in coming together and in the active participation of all members in the evangelizing mission embodied by their own charism. The secular tradition of chapters calls for *physical presence* as a way of safeguarding and promoting the constant search for the common good. Physical presence combines the demands of representing the "entire institute [...] a true sign of its unity in charity" (can. 631§1). Physical presence is the expression of walking together in direct discussion, and communication, not only verbal, in taking on the challenge of different approaches and, if necessary, in more correctly reconsidering a *status quaestionis* before proceeding to definitive resolutions that bind the whole Institute or Society. Physical presence involves the delicate and complex management of elective procedures and the election of Major Superiors: events and procedures that cannot be replaced even by the most sophisticated instruments of telecommunications.

6. In fact, the exercise of collegiality and collegial acts, by their very nature, cannot be reduced to the sum of the votes of the individual members of the chapter, since the synodal/collegial path itself is an integral part of the formation not only of a majority but, even more, of a consensus that arises from shared discernment. It is well known to all those who have experienced chapters that the formation of consensus is the result of *direct dialogue*, which, through physical presence, is assured with respect to timing and manner of communication. This would not seem as effective solely by means of telecommunications. If for a *coetus personarum* (cf. above) an exception can be considered, its extension would lessen the significance of the exercise of collegiality by depriving it of its *added value*: the exercise of a process of discernment aimed at safeguarding the correctness of methods and the strict evaluation of decisions to promote the pursuit of the common good. A *purely technical* (virtual) collegiality risks weakening the sense of co-responsibility or, at least, weakening the conditions of an accurate assessment of its effectiveness.

7. On the occasion of the above mentioned audience granted to the Superiors of the Dicastery, the Holy Father decreed, accepting the request of the same Superiors, that no general or provincial chapters could be held by means of telecommunications, nor the combination of partial physical presence and partial presence through telecommunications, but only by means of physical presence.

As Pope Francis affirmed: "Clearly, it is not enough to multiply connections in order to increase mutual understanding". Even for us, as consecrated men and women, the Pope's question cannot be evaded: "How, then, can we find our true communitarian identity, aware of the responsibility we have towards one another in the online network as well? (FRANCIS, *Message of the Holy Father Francis for the 53rd World Communications Day*, 24 January, 2019).

  
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