

# Government Praxis: The Challenge of Change

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*This text was presented at the UISG Workshop of Canon Law in Rome on 17 November 2017.*

Original in Italian

I would like to develop this reflection by starting from the concept of change and then consider some of the challenges that change poses for Institutes of consecrated life, and in particular to the service of authority. Let us begin to speak about change, by citing c. 576, which assures us of the interest of the Church (in this case, the competent authority) to “*take care that the institutes grow and flourish according to the spirit of the founders and sound traditions.*” Hence, we ask ourselves first in what way and to what extent change surprises us and how we can decide to tackle (or ignore!) it. While I was preparing this talk, the painting of Pieter Bruegel the Elder *the Fall of Icarus* came into my hands. While Icarus tries to conquer the sky, but miserably falls in the water, life continues to flow around him in its daily rhythm: the shepherd is with his flock, the fisherman on the shore, the farmer is ploughing, and the natural elements are following their course.

The problem of Icarus could appear to be strictly personal. He decides to challenge the known at his expense while the rest of the world is satisfied with its lot. Perhaps, we too sometimes decide to ignore or postpone responding to the invitation to change, for fear of facing greater risks, both within our institutes and on the ecclesial and civil levels. On the other hand, the opposite can happen: we understand that we need change and start following “trends” - with the risk of compromising our institutes - because such trends may have worked on some occasions, or even because they were promoted by some outstanding personality. Thus we avoided the internal fatigue of discernment but probably without getting to the bottom of anything. Think of the story of the Pied Piper... A third lesson is given to us by nature: change is an integral part of life and must be accepted with a holistic and long-term perspective. Think, for example, of how the chrysalis takes the risk of disappearing in order to become a butterfly. Yet, Pope Francis reminds us the most profound way of embracing change:

*What does the Gospel bring us? Joy and newness... not to fear making changes according to the law of the Gospel... The Church asks certain changes of us all... May the Lord give us the grace of not remaining prisoners ... one can live the Gospel fully only with a joyful and renewed heart ... (New Wine..., # 10).*

Now, let us ask ourselves: with regard to our choices, where do we place ourselves in relation to the drive for change?

## **The Transitional Phases**

The first step is to ask ourselves how we intend to face the changes that life imposes on us. It seems important to me to emphasize that every change entails some transitional stages, variously described by many authors. Here, I will present two approaches: the one proposed by Jack Tesmer (presented in Daniel Ofman's book *Le qualità autentiche: ispirazione e creatività nelle organizzazioni*) and, the other, William Brudges's theory of transitions in changes. The central idea is that change is not the same thing as transition and that often the resistance that emerges is linked precisely to transitions that are not sufficiently taken into

consideration.

Three transitional phases accompany an organization that intends to continue being “creative,” while facing today’s problems and trying to explore new ways, by listening to what the Spirit says to the Churches. However, the three phases do not follow a sequential chronological order because while the new opens a path with new orientations, the old follows its course until it is no more.

The first transitional phase coincides with the first appearance of a new situation which involves letting go of the past, and is called “*Final Closures*”.

In this phase, the most common reactions of the people involved are:

- Denial
- Anger
- Frustration
- Fear
- Mourning
- Confusion
- Desire
- Liberation

In the second phase, the past gives way, but the new reality is not yet fully developed. This phase is called the “*Neutral Zone*”.

It is accompanied by several behavioral characteristics:

- Impatience
- Skepticism
- Conflict
- Creativity
- Acceptance

In the third transitional phase, the new becomes reality while the behavior linked to the past disappears. This is the phase of “*New Beginnings*.”

New forms of behavior are developed and expressed in new systems and structures. Reactivity decreases and creativity is again freely expressed. The characteristic signs of behavior are:

- Hope
- Anxiety
- Enthusiasm
- Energy

The leaders’ tasks in the three phases can be summarized as follows:

Phase I: Empathy - Confirmation - Vision

Phase II: Information - Communication - Plans / Structures

Phase III: Roles - Participation - Recognition.

These elements are complemented by others which allow the leader to deepen the changes and to live them as occasions for growth, both in a personal and group sense.

These include:

- Becoming aware of one’s inner process and identifying the blocking factors and those which support a mature and integrated life;
- Listening deeply to the members of the team, increasingly engaged in a change towards greater interconnection, participation, and accountability;
- Working with other leaders to create a space of shared awareness; the fruit of a post-conciliar path that saw the charisms walking together with ever greater synergy;

- Identifying the challenges and creating scenarios for discussing them before starting the process, knowing that today dialogue—rather than invoking the members’ vow of obedience—is needed to carry out any kind of change;
- Identifying the members who are most deeply involved in the change, redirecting their energies, and accompanying them in their renewed commitment, knowing that we need more ‘leaders’ and fewer ‘superiors’.

### **What Changes in the Institutes of Consecrated Life?**

I will begin from the new document of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL), *New Wine in New Wineskins*, (the result of the Plenary Session of 27-30 November 2014, published in June 2017), in order to underline some challenging aspects of the change that affect institutes of consecrated life. I do not presume to treat them exhaustively, but I will at least refer to them so that together we can become more aware that this transitional phase in which we are living spans several levels of existence. It is not surprising if the path seems arduous or if we feel weighed down by the imperative to find a new direction immediately – indeed a trap which can easily ensnare the “naïve” leader. It is not by working on details, through micro-managing, and solving problems as we encounter them that we can identify the paths for the future, but rather through a more systematic and global reflection, aimed at developing a more realistic and shared vision of our presence in the Church and in the world.

### ***The Models of the Service of Authority***

*We have passed from the centrality of the role of authority to the centrality of the dynamic of fraternity # 41*, a transition that the document presents as the adoption of relational model.

In this vision authority is seen in the service of communion, as a ministry to accompany the sisters towards conscious and responsible fidelity. Taking care to avoid recourse to managerial techniques, on the one hand, and, on the other, the paternalism of those who want to hide behind the ‘will of God’, this ministry is called to address the expectations of others, of daily reality, and the values that are lived and shared in the community ( See # 14).

We know the journey accomplished over the past 50 years: from the pyramid as a model for the service of the authority before the Council to that of the circular model of the post-conciliar period up to the multi-sided figure (polyhedron) proposed by Pope Francis in EG # 236. We could say that all this always has to do with relationships: only in the case of the pyramid is the “relationship” between those who are above and those below. The circular model represents a “relationship” of equals. In the polyhedron, the “relationship” is between the center and the peripheries. Let us recall what the Pope said about this model: *“the polyhedron, which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness... There is a place for the poor and their culture, their aspirations and their potential. Even people who can be considered dubious on account of their errors have something to offer which must not be overlooked... it is the total sum of persons within a society which pursues the common good, which truly has a place for everyone.”* Translated into our context, the globalization of our institutions has so widely broadened the presence of so many different cultures that we cannot ignore their need not only to be helped to grow and develop but also to mature until they are able to reciprocate in terms of contributing to and taking responsibility at the level of governments.

### ***Our Language***

The change taking place in our language brings to light a very different theology of consecrated life. One example will illustrate the point. The terms *superior-subject*, no longer represent the reality, as # 41 and # 42 indicate. Likewise, c. 618, describes the exercise of authority in terms that today according to *New Wine...* risk being defined as *“spiritual and paternalistic.”* Instead of promoting the *responsible sharing* of a common project at the service of the Gospel, one falls into the “simple execution of those obediences which serve not the Gospel but rather maintain the status quo or respond to urgent administrative, particularly economic, needs.”

### ***The Ecclesial Sense***

Following the urgings of the Popes, since Vatican II, to take the path of the spirituality of communion, Pope

Francis has now launched the reform of the Church with a strong accent on the synodal approach.

### ***The Cultural Element***

The image of the consecrated woman in the collective imagination has changed. No longer is she seen as an angelic figure, characterized by devotion, patience, listening, submission, and perfection, nor as an uneducated, unaware woman, detached from the historical context, with nothing to say about life in the world and its challenges. On the other hand, today there is talk about the urgency of guaranteeing a “*model of anthropological sustainability*” (# 17). This is accompanied by the call to pay attention to the fact pointed out in # 39: “*the insufficient conscientization, or even worse, the removal of the feminine question has negative consequences with grave damages for the younger generations of women.*” Nowadays no-one is willing to adopt the models of obsolete behavior, and the service of authority strongly unmasks their traces.

### ***The Identity of Consecrated Life***

Our identity is no longer a static, theoretical given to be defended and protected but is a process of growing together, in constant transformation, sustained due to all the members engaged in continuous formation which is appropriate to accompany us as responsible and participating adults (# 33).

### ***Practices of Government***

Let us now consider some of the challenges to change that we are experiencing at the level of the practices of government, highlighted in the document:

#### ***Government Structures***

Regarding the structures of government, the document recalls what has already been accomplished in response to adaptation called for by PC # 3: “*to the modern physical and psychological circumstances of the members ... to the needs necessities of the apostolate, the demands of culture, and social and economic circumstances.*” Yet, some adjectives and expressions repeatedly appear in the text and disturb us. We hear about obsolete forms and structures (# 10), structures lacking authenticity and those demanding uniformity (# 12). Some structures are engaged in a process of de-westernization and de-Europeanization (# 13). Furthermore, urged to open themselves to the many cultures in which the Gospel and the charisms are welcomed and rooted (# 37), they are called “*to support each consecrated person’s journey towards the progressive conformation to the sentiments of the Son*” (# 35), based on relationships which foster the *responsible sharing of a common project* (# 42).

When talking about structures, we refer to both the internal ones which make our life possible (e.g., local communities, governance at the intermediate and general levels, authority exercised collegially by chapters and assemblies, consultative and participative bodies such as committees, commissions...) and the apostolic works and activities to be nurtured by superiors and members in a combination of fidelity and adaptation (c. 677 and *New Wine...*, # 7). Structures also include everything related to managing resources, especially all that has to be put in place according to the ethics of solidarity (# 28) and witness to poverty (c. 640).

Developing appropriate structures involves according to # 3:

- acceptance and discernment of the newness of the Gospel
- openness to imagining new modalities
- take into account the long-term nature of the work and the inevitable hiccups on the way
- the emergence of resistance and fear of the future.

All this must be kept in mind when considering the changes to be made because of the decrease in membership, new needs and possibilities, out-dated types of service and new ones that are emerging (*New Wine...* # 7), of multiculturalism which is a new imperative in the management of the institutions.

#### ***Equity in the Composition of the General Chapters (# 48)***

This is a field where we often continue to witness an imbalance of representation especially in regard to multiculturalism and generational turnover. It is, therefore, necessary to attend to the outcomes of reconfigurations in relation to chapter delegates, and of chapter preparations which will avoid ‘political’ manoeuvres and manipulations so that each group receives the space and the time to listen, to understand, to

express themselves and to participate in the processes of discernment and decision-making.

### ***Extension of Mandates Without Interruption (## 46-47 and 51)***

The document refers to this quite widespread practice which is fatal for generational turnover and which prevents experimentation in other styles of animation as much as the level of the common life as at apostolic life. It is recommended that this practice with its continual recourse to postulation be avoided (cc.180-183). It is preferable to explore alternative solutions in order to develop religious formed to exercise the service to authority.

### ***New Requirements for the Councils (## 52-54)***

For the council members, a different season has appeared, in which the sisters take an active part and are responsible for the council's activity. The document highlights some characteristics, so that this organ of collaboration in the institute's government may be promoted:

- participation in the life of the community
- the exercise of dialogue and discernment
- loyalty and sincerity
- ability to disagree and to converge
- means of support
- multicultural configuration
- training for the role of responsibility.

### ***The Distinction of Roles Between the Government on the General and Intermediate Levels***

Despite the virtuous and holy intentions of being and working in the service of the common good, the rapport between the two levels could generate frictions, frustrations, or even simply accentuate the need to take time to discern and decide what is best for the good of the members and the institute. In this sense, it is very important to clarify roles, rights, and limits in the exercise of authority according to the proper law, so as to avoid overlap, confusion, inconveniences, and unfortunately also abuse or misuse of power.

A practical application of the need to define roles between the general and the provincial levels is the institution of hierarchical recourse which, although perhaps rarely mentioned, touches concrete life experiences and at least forces us to change our way of thinking. We are concerned here with situations of conflict which can lead to a violation of rights which pertain to the juridical status of the faithful (cc. 208-231) a situation which some understandings of religious life may sanction under the cover of obedience. (Proof of this may be that c. 670 speaks of the institute's duty to "*supply the members with all those things which are necessary to achieve the purpose of their vocation, according to the constitutions.*" In these cases, legal protection must be provided to both superiors and members, and follows a very precise procedure, described in cc. 1732-1739, which I will briefly present below.

This is a case in which an act of decision, issued by the competent authority, is burdensome for a member of the institution. The act corresponds to a singular administrative act, which includes the decree, the precept, and the rescript. Here are some examples, an obedience imposed against the proper law, restrictions without a just cause, an imposed excommunication (c. 686 § 3), dismissal (cc. 695-703).

Yet, alongside these hypotheses, we can add others because the canon speaks in a generic way of a charge, that is to say a request that clearly requires a greater contribution of resources—e.g., time, competence, effort, dedication, responsibility—which the recipient claims is beyond her capacity: for example, a transfer to a mission land or to a house with special circumstances.

### **The Process of Conciliation**

C. 1733 advises avoiding conflict with the major superior who is the author of the act and, thus, attests that the law does not intend to endorse an institutional rupture but rather a conciliation. Moreover, in the light of c. 50, one can always verify the collection of *information* (concerning the qualities of the person) and *the necessary proofs* (documents and testimonies), which make it possible for the authority to act prudently in issuing a singular decree with equity. How then should one proceed in these cases?

- agree on a fair solution
- by appropriate means, including the mediation of authoritative persons and study = informal means; or a designated organ = formal means
- keep in mind that these attempts do not interrupt the deadline for a possible appeal.

### ***Prior Immediate Appeal / Remonstratio***

According to c. 1734, the right of the person who requests from the author, in writing and within 10 days from the legitimate intimation of the decree, its revocation or amendment or the suspension of its execution. This request must be made by registered letter with acknowledgment of receipt because the Major Superior must answer within 30 days from the date of reception. It must be noted that this step is not envisioned when the decision/act of government has been made by a Superior Delegate, because in this case the Major Superior is addressed directly.

Options for the Major Superior:

- a. Revocation of the contested decree
- b. Amendment of the contested decree
- c. Rejecting the request for revocation
- d. Ignoring the appeal

Options for the contending sister:

- a. Abandon other actions
- b. Address a hierarchical appeal against the decision within 15 days after the date of notification, the thirtieth day in case d) above.

### ***The Hierarchical Appeal***

C. 1737 provides for the possibility of submitting the decree to the examination and judgment of the Superior in the hierarchical line of the one who issued it (= Superior General). The appeal can be presented to the author of the decree (provincial superior) who must immediately transmit it to the competent hierarchical superior (superior general).

The Sister has the right to the services of an advocate or procurator, to present memorials, to know the evidence against her, and she can be personally answer the questions of the Superior General, who acts as “judge” (c. 1738).

The decision-making power of the Superior General, which is very vast, is described in c. 1739. She can:  
 confirm the decree = siding with the decision of the provincial superior;  
 declare it invalid = due to some violation of the law or technical defect;  
 rescind / revoke it = without discussing its validity but merely by withdrawing and thus making it ineffective;  
 emend it = confirming the original but with modifications;  
 replace it = replacing the original with a new one which adds or modifies some of its parts;  
 abrogate it = repealing the original and issuing another decree that is contrary to the previous one.

One might think that the principle of subsidiarity runs a great risk here, but we are actually faced with a specific appeal. Consequently, the fact that the decision must not necessarily be in conformity with that of the provincial superior who issued the decree is in line with the protection of rights. It is, however, worth adding that the latter could, in turn, appeal against the decision of the authority that reformed her act, and this confirms that everyone has the right to be heard.

An appeal against the decree issued by the Superior General may be addressed to the Dicastery of the CIVCSVA, (again for matters of violation of the law in the decision or procedure) and further to the Apostolic Signature as the last hierarchical level.

I realize that while such situations are rare they are not really implausible.

Let us remember that members in difficulty usually tend not to speak to the competent authority but rather to the one they find most convenient! Therefore, it is up to you to keep the boundaries clear and to help people

to follow a procedure fashioned not so much from written laws but from the wisdom that has passed the test of life experience. The great change that I consider necessary here is the need to be aware that our decisions are also acts of particular administration which may have unintended consequences (if we do act carefully with respect for people's rights, clear procedures, defined content), which is subject to different interpretations and, therefore, challengeable. In any case, this is an attitude that concretely attests to the desire to put oneself at the service of the life and the vocation of the members, according to the spirit of the Gospel and of c. 617 which states:

*Superiors are to fulfill their office and exercise their authority in accordance with the norms of the universal law and of the proper law.*

### **Conclusions**

When we think about the future of Consecrated Life, it seems that what is happening to us must make sense: meaning that will eventually be clarified, when we will wake up as after a bad dream and understand the details and the steps that are obscure today. It may seem that time really is a straight line—past, present, future—leading to paradise. Yet, the very contemplation of nature rather suggests to us the circularity of life. See the alternations of day and night, of the seasons, the stars, and even the circulation of blood in our bodies... I mean, to put it in other words, that we need to face change with the open hands of those who agree to let go of a known project of life, to take off their sandals again and try to walk in new, surprising, perhaps disquieting, lands. We do not know what the Spirit will say to the Church about consecrated life in the future. What we do know is that we have a present to build with creativity and integrity, without the claim of mortgaging the future, but also supported by the certainty of being part of a beautiful constellation that remains written in heaven!