

“Holding Fast to the Mission and Works Proper to the Institute”

Canon 677.1 states: “Superiors and members are faithfully to hold fast to the mission and works which are proper to their institute. According to the needs of the time and place, however, they are prudently to adapt them, making use of new and appropriate means.” This canon is found in Book II of the *Code of Canon Law*, in which canons 673-677 treat specifically the apostolate of religious institutes.

Charity and right relationships bind religious institutes to the service of God’s people through the works that are theirs, that is, those that are distinctly bound to the foundation of the institute itself or are a fruit of the sound traditions of the religious family.¹ Paragraph 37 of Pope John Paul II’s 1996 apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata* issued a call to perseverance, competence in personal work, and a dynamic fidelity to mission, adapting forms of service to new situations and needs. Consecrated persons are reminded to look to their Rule of Life as a reliable source of criteria to discern and respond to contemporary needs without departing from the institute’s original inspiration.²

The documents on consecrated life have consistently urged institutes of consecrated life to propose enterprising initiatives in response to the signs of the times in today’s world. *Starting Afresh from Christ* states that “every new attempt at renewal can be seen as a new impetus for the evangelizing mission. . . . This is a time when the Spirit is breaking forth, opening up new possibilities.”³ Religious institutes are prompted to “creativity, wisdom and dialogue among members of the institute, among institutes with similar works, and with those responsible for the local Church . . . in order to find the right answers” to further the great works of their respective charisms.⁴

WHAT ARE AN INSTITUTE’S “PROPER” WORKS?

The works “proper” to an institute are to be understood in a broad sense. They correspond to

the institute’s purpose or specific objectives. It is critical to acknowledge the distinction between an institute’s purpose and the specific means of accomplishing that purpose. A preferential option for the poor must be discerned in light of those most in need and must respond to the analysis of contemporary situations in light of the Gospel. For example, an institute founded to care for women and children in the 19th century, according to the needs of that time, might adapt this foundational purpose in the 21st century through involvement in the rescue of women trafficked for sexual exploitation. The means of accomplishing this purpose can be multifaceted—for example, lobbying, education, working with law enforcement agencies, setting up houses for receiving the rescued, and other means of service. Change is appropriate according to time and place.

Many more examples of holding fast to the mission and works proper to the institute are witnessed today in the vibrant collaboration of religious institutes with the laity. The ministries of health care and education exemplify courage, interdependence, and inventiveness in the staffing, administration, and corporate sponsorship of these great services to humanity. The

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A Shared Statement of Identity For the Catholic Health Ministry

We are the people of Catholic health care, a ministry of the church continuing Jesus' mission of love and healing today. As provider, employer, advocate, citizen—bringing together people of diverse faiths and backgrounds—our ministry is an enduring sign of health care rooted in our belief that every person is a treasure, every life a sacred gift, every human being a unity of body, mind, and spirit.

We work to bring alive the Gospel vision of justice and peace. We answer God's call to foster healing, act with compassion, and promote wellness for all persons and communities, with special attention to our neighbors who are poor, underserved, and most vulnerable. By our service, we strive to transform hurt into hope. 🕊

As the church's ministry of health care, we commit to:

- Promote and Defend Human Dignity
- Attend to the Whole Person
- Care for Poor and Vulnerable Persons
- Promote the Common Good
- Act on Behalf of Justice
- Steward Resources
- Act in Communion with the Church

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CANON LAW

Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life has looked upon these endeavors as vital relationships for the sake of furthering God's mission by granting them public juridic status in the church. Likewise, religious institutes invite and share practices of prayer with the church at large,⁵ communicate congregational charisms with innumerable lay associates and affiliates (Canons 303 and 677.2), and enter into common ministries on a global level.⁶ These are truly visible signs of a spirituality of communion,⁷ of a dialogue of charity reflecting a thirst for encountering the Christ of the third millennium in active and contemplative forms of love.

A DYNAMIC FIDELITY

Obstacles to creative fidelity in the 21st century might demonstrate themselves in world-weariness, lack of will, resistant attitudes toward institutional forms of mission, or an inability to appreciate the original apostolates of the founders as they have developed today.

The apostolate is inherent in religious life through the individual's witness of consecrated life, expressed through a contemplative union with God; through public apostolic action performed in the name of the church; and through the practice of works of mercy, both spiritual and corporal. The fruitfulness of these means lies mainly in the faithfulness to the foundational charism of the institute. By virtue of one's profession as a member of the institute, the individual religious becomes a partner in an apostolic service for which the institute was founded. To remove a religious from the sphere to which he or she belongs according to his or her vocation is juridically questionable.⁸ Thus the principles established in canons 673-677 are of a theological nature with clear canonical effects.

Pope John Paul II recommended that religious institutes be faithful to the Gospel vision that characterizes

them and gives a visible physiognomy to their ministerial witness.⁹ Renewal of an institute's works requires a dynamic fidelity, often calling the members to places they never imagined going. Our present Holy Father tells us, "As a community, the Church must practice love. Love needs to be organized if it is to be an ordered service to the community."¹⁰ Such has been the case as religious institutes have adapted their ministries to present realities while being faithful to the mission and works proper to their institutes. ■

NOTES

1. Pope Paul VI, *Perfectae Caritatis* (Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life), October 28, 1965, para. 20.
2. Pope John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, March 25, 1996, para. 37.
3. Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium*, May 19, 2002, paras. 9 and 10.
4. Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, para. 19.
5. See Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration Prayer Partner Ministry, La Crosse, WI (www.fspa.org/prayer/partners.asp).
6. See Franciscan Common Venture (www.franciscancommonventure.org) and "Congregation of African Sisters Travels to Philadelphia to Receive Technology Training at Chestnut Hill College on September 28th," *Business Wire*, September 23, 2004 (www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0EIN/is_2004_Sept_23/ai_n6209013).
7. Pope John Paul II, paras. 46 and 47.
8. E. Caparros, M. Thériault, and J. Thorn, eds., *Code of Canon Law Annotated*, Wilson & Lafleur Limitée, Montreal, Quebec, pp. 460-461.
9. Pope John Paul II in speeches to Brazilian men and women religious, July 3, 1980, referenced in E. Gambari, *Religious Life According to Vatican II and the New Code of Canon Law*, Daughters of St. Paul, Boston, 1986, p. 422.
10. Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, December 25, 2005, para. 20.

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