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WHAT IS An Institute of

Editor's Note: Leaders of Catholic health care organizations differ from leaders of other-than-Catholic ones in that their work is bound by both civil law and the canon law of the Catholic Church. Because this is so, leaders of Catholic organizations should know something about canon law.

Toward this end, Health Progress is offering its readers a series of articles on canon law. These articles, each of which will be the work of a different writer, is under the general editorship of a well-known expert in the field, Fr. Francis G. Morrissey, OMI, PhD, JCD, professor of canon law, Saint Paul University, Ottawa, Ontario.

Institutes of consecrated life have exercised a predominant role in the ministry of Catholic health care in the United States. They founded vast networks for health care, served as administrators and caregivers, and provided financial



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resources for the sake of the healing mission of Christ. In the broad sense of the term, there are three categories of institutes of consecrated life identified in the Code of Canon Law: religious institutes, secular institutes, and societies of apostolic life. Each of these forms of life has a distinct legal reality and clearly identifiable characteristics.

The legal reality of an institute occurs through the approbation of ecclesial authority, either a diocesan bishop who consults with the Holy See, or the Holy See acting on its own. Approbation by church authority gives the institute canonical recognition with legal effects in the public arena of the church. A juridic entity is created with defined rights and obligations (canon 576).¹ For example, the institute may define its way of life; acquire, own, and administer property; and act in the name of the church through its apostolic works in accord with church law. These institutes are part of the worldwide visible body of the church.

Ecclesial approbation does not of itself

create the inspiration for the founding of an institute of consecrated life. History indicates that a person or group of people is first inspired in a particular way by the Gospel and responds to the Gospel message by organizing some apostolic work or renewed emphasis on Gospel spirituality. This is referred to as the *charism* of an institute, the pattern of God's wisdom and power exemplified in human experience. It involves an intuitive impetus to respond to the challenges and difficulties of a particular time in history with genuine creativity.²

Institutes of consecrated life may comprise either women or men. Some may include clerics. Common to all institutes is a commitment through public or private profession of the evangelical counsels (poverty, chastity, obedience) or some other bond determined by the institutes' constitutions. Vows or bonds of commitment are means through which an individual expresses his or her total consecration to Christ and by which his or her whole life becomes a gift of worship to God in charity (canon 607).

The Code of Canon Law defines the various categories of consecrated life and related groups. While there are some commonalities among the categories, there are unique characteristics to be noted.

■ **Religious Institutes** A religious institute is a society in which, in accordance with its law, the members pronounce public vows and live a fraternal life in common (canon 607.2). The Sisters of Mercy and the various institutes of Franciscan, Dominican, or Benedictine life are well-known examples

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of religious institutes. Many religious institutes carry on a public corporate apostolate such as health care, education, or various forms of social work, but some may be devoted exclusively to an enclosed way of life with contemplation and prayer as their principal apostolate.

■ *Secular Institutes* A secular institute is an institute of consecrated life in which Christ's faithful, living in the world, strive for perfection of charity and endeavor to contribute to the sanctification of the world, especially from within (canon 710). Members strive to be a leaven in their sphere of influence by permeating everything they do with an evangelical spirit (canon 713). They are engaged in their own professions or avocations in their own name and on their own responsibility in accordance with the secular manner of life proper to them (canon 713). Some religious institutes have Third Order groups³ connected with them, and these may include secular institutes, such as the Secular Franciscan Order. Members retain their status as laity (canon 711), and clerical members normally are incardinated in a diocese (canons 266.3, 713.3, and 715.1). Public corporate apostolates are not common to secu-

lar institutes.

■ *Societies of Apostolic Life* Societies of apostolic life approximate institutes of consecrated life. Their members, without taking religious vows, pursue the apostolic purpose proper to each society. Living a fraternal life in common in their own special manner, they strive for the perfection of charity through the observance of the constitutions (canon 731.1). In some of these societies, the members through a bond defined in their constitutions (promises, oath, private vows, *propositum*) embrace the evangelical counsels (canon 731.2). Common life and a corporate apostolate are typical of societies of apostolic life. The Daughters of Charity, the Sisters of Social Service, and the Missionary Society of St. Columban are all examples of this form of life.

All of these forms of institutional consecrated life, as well as consecrated virgins, hermits, and widows, constitute an integral element of the life of the church in mutual relationship with the laity and ordained members of the church. All members share a common dignity and make up the holiness of the church. In virtue of their common baptism, they cooperate in the building up of the one Body of Christ according to their vocation in life. The diversity of these forms of life is a gift of the Spirit to the church. In the Holy Spirit, a communion of beatitude service is given to the healing, teaching, and sanctifying mission of Christ.⁴ ■

NOTES

1. All canons quoted in this article are taken from E. Caparros, M. Theriault, and J. Thorn, eds., *Code of Canon Law Annotated*, Wilson & Lafleur Limitee, Quebec, Canada, 1993.
2. Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the New Millennium*, Pauline Books & Media, Boston, 2002, para. 13.
3. See "Third Orders," *Catholic Encyclopedia*, www.newadvent.org/cathen/14637b.htm: "Third Orders signify in general lay members of religious orders, i.e. men and women who do not necessarily live in community and yet can claim to wear the habit and participate in the good works of some great order."
4. John Paul II, *The Consecrated Life*, 1996, para. 31; available from U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, DC, as Publication 5-122; text and format from Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City.