

**THE FOUNDATION OF NEW RELIGIOUS INSTITUTES: A BRIEF
COMMENTARY ON THE GUIDELINES AND DIRECTIVES OF THE
CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF NIGERIA¹**

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ABSTRACT

There are very many pious associations in Nigeria seeking approval as religious institutes. At the same time, there are lots of serious abuses by founders and foundress owing to their ignorance of what Religious Life entails and/or lack of guidance from competent ecclesiastical authorities. Some young men and women, ignorant of the status of such associations, join them. Finally, some of the associations disband or never get to be approved and their lives are ruined. The Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria produced the *“Guidelines and Directives on Founding Religious Institutes and Lay Associations in Nigeria”* (September, 2014). The *Guidelines* intend to aid bishops and founders through the different stages from foundation to approval as a Religious Institute. The *Guidelines* recognized that charism is a gift of the Holy Spirit given to founders for service in the Church. Such charism addresses the needs of the church. A charism is usually unique and original. The Apostolic See does not allow same charism replicated in the same diocese or episcopal conference. Every charism must have its focus on Christ. Spirituality springs from an institute’s charism. The spirituality the founder gives to the association is to follow the form of Religious Life he intends to found, e.g., Religious or Secular Institute or Society of Apostolic Life. Apostolate and charism mutually enrich each other. Charism is the identity of an Institute. Apostolate is the outward expression of an Institute’s charism. The bishop is the competent authority that discerns and approves these associations as Religious Institutes. He should make sure that founders meticulously follow the laid down rules and conditions before he can give approval after consulting the Apostolic See.

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(Editor's note: The author, one of the collaborators with the CBCN's in the production of document under review, had earlier presented to the CBCN a talk on this theme during the bishops' meeting in Akure, Nigeria, in 2016. He now offers reader an informed commentary on the document, also in the light of the recent documents of the Apostolic See, especially the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's Letter, *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, to the Bishops of the Catholic Church Regarding the Relationship Between Hierarchical and Charismatic Gifts in the Life and the Mission of the Church" [May 15, 2016]. Thus, the reader will find addition of more conditions or requirements necessary for the bishop to review in the process of accompanying and approving an institute and a lay association. The author emphasizes the grave responsibility of the bishops in this process. The Holy Spirit can use anybody, any Catholic, no matter how weak the person might be or how estranged the situation could be. However, it is incumbent upon the bishops to truly accompany and strictly discern and evaluate the founders and their project, not out of an eagerness to "quench the Spirit" but for the service of truth and common good, "upholding whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy" in the project [1 Thess. 5:19-22; Philippians 4:8]. When they do the thorough job of discernment and consistent application of the Church's own guidelines and directives to stop whatever they judge and are convinced are *not* from the Holy Spirit, this effort of bishops will hopefully facilitate the restraint and management of the phenomenon of the proliferation of religious institutes and lay associations in Nigeria and, positively, it will contribute to the discernment of vocations and to the enhancement and qualitative growth Consecrated life in Nigeria).

INTRODUCTION

Religious life is a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church. Religious men and women have, to a greater extent, sustained the missionary life and work of the Church. They are practically great evangelizers both in word and action. They, normally, have no frontiers as they are ready to be sent anywhere in the world. By their vow of obedience, they are always ready to say *fiat* to the command of the superior to be sent. They largely express the Church's charismatic nature. Through them, so many and different kinds of charisms have been gifted to the Church. Religious life is also mediated by the Church because it belongs to the life and holiness of the Church. The sacred hierarchy has an oversight function to promote and to regulate it. Speaking about the ecclesial dimension of religious life, *Mutuae relationes* refers to "the unquestionable bond of religious life with the life and holiness of the Church."² A founder or foundress who is inspired with a charism that will give birth to a religious institute must submit the whole process from beginning to completion to the competent ecclesiastical authority. It is this authority that discerns its charism, spirituality and apostolate and guides the process until his approval gives it the

² Sacred Congregation for Bishops and Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes (SCB & SCRIS), Norms *Mutuae Relationis*, (MR), May 14, 1978, no. 8.

status of a religious institute. This same process of establishment applies to any other form of consecrated life, such as, secular institutes or societies of apostolic life.

1. BACKGROUND TO THE DOCUMENT

The document from the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, *Guidelines and Directives on Founding Religious Institutes and lay Associations in Nigeria*, (Guidelines) which necessitated this reflection was given from the background of the numerous associations in many Catholic dioceses in Nigeria either pretending to be religious institutes or knocking on the doors of the diocesan bishops requesting to be approved as such. Many of the founders and foundresses are ignorant of the meaning and demands of religious life. Consequently, they get confused with regard to what exactly they want to bring about. Innocent young men and women, who are also ignorant and without proper guidance, join them. Without appropriate formation and stability in such associations, their lives are ruined after being trapped in them for years. It is not uncommon to notice from the initiators some inordinate ambition to answer father-founder and mother-foundress to the detriment of these innocent young people.

1.1. CLUELESSNESS OF FOUNDERS AND FOUNDRESSES ABOUT FOUNDING CHARISM

Religious life does not begin without the founder or foundress being inspired by some charism given by the Holy Spirit on behalf of the Church. You ask some of these founders what their charism is, they have no idea what you are talking about. They are totally clueless.

1.2. LACK OF FINANCIAL RESOURCES

Money is necessary for the survival of any organization. Many founders and foundresses of these preparatory associations are totally ill-prepared for the cost of maintaining their members. They often have no apostolates and projects to sustain them. Many begin their association before looking for apostolates to sustain them. They depend on charity which is often meagre.

1.3. ABUSES

The young women and men are asked before admission to the novitiate to pay some huge amount of money. This is part of the prospectus given them. Before first profession, some of these associations would ask novices to pay another huge amount of money. That demands freeing them from the novitiate to go and look for funds. Many get entangled with some men who would give them the money at a cost. Before final profession, the members are asked to pay another huge sum.

Guidelines indicates that these initiatives springing up in our land are so convoluted in their understanding of the three-fold identity of religious institutes, namely: charism, spirituality and apostolate. "For some of the initiatives, charism and

spirituality seem to be subdued by apostolate. Many of the Religious Congregations will be happy to tell their apostolate, either as education, hospital work, taking care of the poor, caring for orphans etc., but are unclear about their charism and spirituality.”³

It is the responsibility of diocesan bishops to regulate these abuses. They are not just the chief shepherds of the faithful but also the custodians of the sacred mysteries. They are the magisterium of their dioceses, the teacher of the faithful. They are the chief liturgists of their dioceses. They have been given care of all the souls of Catholics in their dioceses to shepherd. These young men and women whose lives are ruined are among the people entrusted to their care to teach, to shepherd and to guide on the path to heaven. Apparently the church has not done enough to guide them. It was high time the bishops got involved to stem the tide. This is why the *Guidelines* was produced to help the bishops in the process of accompanying these associations, to discern them, approve those they feel come from the Holy Spirit and disband the others.

2. TYPES OF INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE

Guidelines discusses the different forms of institutes of consecrated life. It refers to *Vita Consecrata* which delineates three types of institutes of consecrated life, viz: Religious Institutes, Secular Institutes and Societies of Apostolic Life.

Religious Institutes are essentially characterized by the public profession of the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience by vows. Religious Institutes can be clerical or lay. Other characteristics of religious institutes are, they live community life in common, render public witness to Christ and the Church, this entails separation from the world, canon 607 §§ 2 and 3.⁴

Secular Institutes are characterized by consecration in secularity, an original form of life, and profession of the evangelical counsels. They live the secular life in the world as secular professionals. They are not obliged to live community life, members can live alone, can be lay or clerical or both, in accordance with their constitutions.⁵

Societies of Apostolic Life constitute some type of consecrated life different from Religious and Secular Institutes. They take private vows. Members can live in community or alone also in accordance with their constitutions.⁶

The document indicates some other forms of consecrated life which are different from Institutes of Consecrated life. These are Hermitism and Anchoritism, Order of

³ Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, *Guidelines and Directives on Founding Religious Institutes and Lay Associations in Nigeria*, Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, September 2014, n. 6..

⁴ *Guidelines*, n. 11.

⁵ *Ibid.* n. 12.

⁶ *Ibid.* n. 13.

Virgins, and Order of Widows. These participate in and contribute to the holiness of the Church (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 44).⁷

3. CHARISM OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTES

Guidelines discusses charism under the following sub-titles: meaning of charism, Charisms Given for the Good of the Church, Charisms Address the Needs of the Church and Society, Uniqueness and Originality of Charism, Authenticity of Charism and the Life of the Founder, Centrality of Christ in Each Charism, Every Pious Association is not Destined to be a Religious Institute.

Charism means free gift. It is a special gift of the Holy Spirit, a manifestation of the work of God, a service directed to the Lord in the Church or in the world. Charism addresses the needs of the Church and society. Institutes of consecrated life always come into existence to fulfil a timely need in the Church. The ultimate justification for the approval of a new Institute is whether the charism is motivated by the Holy Spirit in response to the will of God in the service of the Church. It must be committed to address a particular need of the Church. The Holy Spirit inspires certain individuals to band together to meet those specific needs.

The generating power of a new Institute of Consecrated Life is given in its original inspiration – its charism. The newness and originality of a charism do not mean deviating from the nature of Consecrated Life but the newness of the gift, the charism. Each new Institute brings a unique contribution to the work of a particular Church and ultimately to the universal Church.

However, if the uniqueness and originality are lacking, if it is similar to an existing charism, the Apostolic See suggests that the members of the Association join the existing Religious Institute.⁸ The Apostolic See does not want the same charism replicated in the same Diocese or Conference. Charisms should always be unique and original.

Mutuae relationes details what to look for in the life a founder and his disciples that can show the authenticity of a charism. They include, a continual examination regarding fidelity to the Lord, docility to His Spirit, intelligent attention to circumstances and an outlook cautiously directed to the signs of the times, the will to be part of the Church, the awareness of subordination to the sacred hierarchy, boldness of initiatives, constancy in the giving of self, humility in bearing with adversities.⁹

Pope Leo XIII's Constitution, *Conditae a Christo* of December 8, 1900; and Pope St. Pius X's *Motu proprio, Dei Providentis*, July 16, 1906, make these points in relation to the evaluation of charism and founders by the Bishop:

⁷ Ibid. 14.

⁸ Leo XIII, apostolic constitution *Conditae a Christo*, December 8, 1900, (cf. Papal Pronouncements, A Guide, 1740-1978).

⁹ *Mutuae Relationis*, no. 12.

- a. Before applying to Rome, the bishop must examine its constitutions as to their orthodoxy and moral character, and satisfy himself that they conform to the sacred canons, the decrees of the Roman Pontiffs, and the scope intended.
- b. If possible, rather than permit the foundation of a new Congregation, the bishop should call in members of a Congregation, already approved, if its purpose and charism are the same.
- c. The purpose or aim of the new Congregation must be well defined and not too diversified, which would be the case if the Congregation should propose to devote itself to all kinds of charitable works.

One of the basic norms determining the genuineness of a charism of a new Institute is its bond or relationship with the Church. Therefore, the founder, in spite of his persistence, must in humility be submissive to the hierarchy.

The document *Mutuae relationes* recognizes that the Holy Spirit can inspire certain individuals of the Church to undertake certain works for the good of the Church. However, any apostolic activity undertaken by founders/foundresses must be in harmony with and subject to the authority and supervisory approval of the bishop.

Mutuae relationes places the burden on the competent authority who is to discern the authenticity of the new charism to make sure they do not approve an institute that is useless. They should be able to also discern from the life of the founder what may be a devotional phenomenon instead of a charism. A devotional phenomenon may look like a charism while it is not. They are to do this humbly and objectively.

In some regions there is noticeable a certain overabundance of initiatives to found new religious institutes. Those who are responsible for discerning the authenticity of each foundation should weigh with humility, of course, but also objectively, constantly, and seeking to foresee clearly the future possibilities -- every indication of a credible presence of the Holy Spirit, both to receive His gifts "with thanksgiving and consolation" (LG 12) and also to avoid that "institutes may be imprudently brought into being which are useless or lacking in sufficient resources" (PC 19). In fact, when judgment regarding the establishment of an institute is formulated only in view of its usefulness and suitability in the field of action, or simply on the basis of the comportment of some person who experiences devotional phenomena, in themselves ambiguous, then indeed it becomes evident that the genuine concept of religious life in the Church is in a certain manner distorted (cf. Part I, ch. III).¹⁰

Mutuae relationes proffers three characteristics needed for the correct assessment of the authenticity of a charism by the competent authority.¹¹

¹⁰ *Mutuae Relationis*, 51

¹¹ *Ibid*

- a) Its special origin from the Spirit, distinct, even though not separate, from special personal talents, which become apparent in the sphere of activity and organization;
- b) A profound ardor of love to be conformed to Christ in order to give witness to some aspect of His mystery;
- c) A constructive love of the Church, which absolutely shrinks from causing any discord in Her.

The Bishops, as the successors of the apostles, are given power to discern if the charism given to a particular individual is centred on Christ and in service of the mission of the Church. Therefore, for a charism to be centred on Christ it must be a gift of the Holy Spirit; it must be a service to the Church; it must contribute to building up of the Body of Christ; and it must be submissive to the Church.

Canon 299 grants the Christian faithful the right and freedom to form associations. However, every pious association is not destined to be a Religious Institute. While the Church guarantees the right of the faithful to form an association, it does not include the right of every faithful to form an Institute of Consecrated Life, which is a special kind of association. It is pertinent that for an association destined to become an Institute of Consecrated Life, it has to go through the stages of formation and development, first as a private association, then a public association, and lastly, approval as a Religious Institute. There are many pious associations in the Church. Bishops should discern that what is presented to them is not just a pious association meant to serve the Church as such. Every pious association must not become an Institute of Consecrated Life.

4.1. CHARISM AND SPIRITUALITY

Guidelines notes that Spirituality and charism mutually enrich each other. It is a Christo-centric spirituality perfected by charism. "The Church is given the mandate to accomplish the mission of Christ. Consequently, the Holy Spirit is given to the Church to teach and empower her to accomplish that mission. The Holy Spirit inspires certain individuals and entrusts them some charisms to serve the needs of the Church in the fulfillment of her mission. Charism leads both the receiver and members of the Church to union with the Giver, that is, with God. Therefore, the spirituality that arises from such charism leads to holiness."¹²

To respond to this spirituality, the founder and his members, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, embrace Christ's ongoing invitation to 'repent and believe the Gospel.' They strive for a personal conversion that is hinged on an ever-deepening communion of faith, hope and love with other Christians in their religious community and in the apostolate to be ever more faithful witnesses to Christ, the values of His Gospel and the teaching of His Church in their daily life as religious.

¹² *Guidelines*, n. 32.

4.2. SPIRITUALITY OF A PREPARATORY ASSOCIATION

The type of spirituality expected of a preparatory association should reflect the form of the Institute of Consecrated Life or Society of Apostolic Life that the founder intends for his members. The founder must have the clarity of mind that he is establishing a Religious Institute or a Secular Institute, or a Society of Apostolic Life. This distinction is not clear in the minds of many founders and foundresses in Nigeria. They only understand religious life but not the others. This clarity informs the type of spirituality based on the characteristics of the Institute or Society he chooses. To clarify this point further, it is pertinent to examine how the characteristics of a Religious Institute can influence the spirituality of a preparatory association.

4.3. SPIRITUALITY OF A RELIGIOUS INSTITUTE

The spirituality of a preparatory association that intends to become a Religious Institute has to be anchored on the values that are characteristics of Religious Institute. Canon 607, §§2 and 3 give the four characteristics as follows:

- a) members must profess public vows of chastity, poverty and obedience;
- b) members must live community life in common;
- c) members must give public witness to Christ and to the Church;
- d) Religious life entails separation from the world.

The spirituality of such an association should focus on these four characteristics of religious life. The evangelical counsels, so important for religious life, lived in imitation of Christ, can become the summit and centre of their spirituality. In *Vita Consecrata*, St. John Paul II indicates the necessity of members to conform to Christ; he exhorts religious to return to the Rule and Constitutions which provide a map for the whole journey of discipleship.¹³ This enables them to grow in holiness through obedience to their constitutions, then to their superiors, and to the Church. Community life must be centred on fraternal love strengthened by communal prayer. Besides personal prayer life, praying of the Liturgy of the Hours as a community and other prayers prescribed in their statutes and constitutions are very important in nurturing their spirituality. The public witness to Christ and to the Church which is expressed through the fraternal life of the religious and their involvement in the apostolate gives them an apostolic spirituality. As religious life entails separation from the world, their spirituality will demand detachment from material things.

4.4. CHARISM AND SPIRITUALITY TO REFLECT THE TYPE OF INSTITUTE OR SOCIETY INTENDED BY THE FOUNDER

Guidelines underscores the importance of a founder of an association to determine from the outset whether he is founding a Religious Institute or Secular Institute or Society of Apostolic Life. This will reflect on the type of charism and spirituality he gives his association. Often, founders and foundresses think every Institute of

¹³ John Paul II, post synodal apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, (VC) March 25, 1996, nos. 36 and 37.

Consecrated Life or Society of Apostolic Life is a Religious Institute. They are unable to differentiate one from the other. But with clarity about the form of life he wants, he sets out from the start with the right charism and the right spirituality for his association.

If he intends to found a Religious Institute, canons 573 – 704 will be a good guide. He should not gloss over the fact that religious profess public vows of chastity, poverty and obedience; live community life in common, give witness to Christ and the Church; and are separated from the world, (cf. canon 607).

If Secular Institute is the founder's choice, canons 573 – 704, including specifically, 710-730 will be a good help. He should pay attention to its constitutions, particularly, charism and spirituality, (including formation, apostolate and government). He is to recognize the fact that Secular Institutes were approved to live in the world and operate from the world (cf. canons 710; 712; 713; and 714). These relevant canons should guide the founder in determining their spirituality and apostolate. He has to decide whether they should live in community or not. He should determine the type of vows they profess and the obligation from them. According to the canons, these will be determined by the founder in the constitutions.

Where the founder desires to establish a Society of Apostolic Life, he should consult canons 573 -704, and also specifically, 731-746. Their statutes and spirituality should take cognizance of the fact that they do not profess public vows, (canon 713 §1). They are consecrated in some way but are not stringently considered as consecrated persons. Strictly, consecrated persons are members of the Institutes of Consecrated Life.

5.1. ESSENCE OF APOSTOLATE FOR CONSECRATED RELIGIOUS

In *Guidelines*, the bishops affirm the significance of the apostolic dimension of religious consecration which necessitates the engagement of religious persons with apostolic works in the realization of their charisms. The term 'apostolate' underscores the role and function of "an apostle" in its meaning and content. Related to an Institute, apostolate expresses the concrete activity which speaks to its charism. Apostolate is not about doing everything or any activity, but the very activity embarked upon must flow from the charism of the Institute.

Church documents and the canons of the Code on Religious Institutes admonish Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life to live their charisms in the apostolates they are engaged in. *Perfectae caritatis*, nn. 8 and 10 states, "their whole life is imbued with apostolic spirit and the whole of their apostolic action is animated by a religious spirit. For their apostolate is an essential part of the pastoral life of the Church."

The apostolate of religious expresses the concrete activity which speaks to its charism. Apostolate is not about doing everything or any activity, but the very

activity embarked upon must be attuned to the charism of the Institute. For consecrated persons, the very life they live is already an apostolate. The external work done consolidates their primary mode of evangelization through witnessing with their lives as lived in fidelity to their charism. Religious Institutes should live their charisms in the apostolate they undertake. Superiors and members are to hold fast to the works and mission proper to their Institutes, cf. canon 611.

5.2. RELATIONSHIP OF APOSTOLATE TO CHARISM OF INSTITUTES

The bishops underscore the symbiotic relationship between apostolate and charism. They mutually enrich each other. "Charism is the very identity of an Institute. It is what generates the apostolate of the Institute. Apostolate on the other hand, is the outward expression of an Institute's charism. The apostolate that members of Religious Institutes are engaged in are necessarily the offshoot of the charisms which have been recognized and approved for the Institutes by ecclesiastical authorities during the course of the approval process. The apostolate of an Institute remains a factor that renders concrete, practical and beneficial for humanity the charism it professes."¹⁴

The approval by an ecclesiastical authority is an indication that the apostolate bears the authority and support of the competent authority. *Perfectae Caritatis 2* admonishes Religious Institutes to go back to the details of their original charism, implores them to re-discover and revert to the original apostolic activity they were made to undertake.

Religious Institutes are called to be open to new pastoral needs of the mission. In carrying out their apostolate, Religious Institutes are to be aware of the challenges of their time, understand the profound theological meaning of these challenges through discernment and guidance of the Spirit. Guided by the Holy Spirit, they are to present new answers to the new problems of the contemporary world. In his 2014 Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People, Pope Francis said that he counts on religious "to wake up the world".¹⁵ For this reason, constitutions, directories, books of customs, of prayers, of ceremonies and such like should be properly revised, obsolete prescriptions suppressed and brought into line with conciliar and papal documents.

6.1. STABLE PATRIMONY NEEDED FOR APPROVAL

Guidelines proffers four aspects of the patrimony of a preparatory association seeking canonical erection as an Institute that the competent authority should closely examine before formal approval by decree. The patrimony may be considered from two perspectives,

¹⁴ *Guidelines*, p. 39.

¹⁵ Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter, *To All Consecrated People: On the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, II, n. 2.

- i. the spiritual cum juridical patrimony as given in the Code of Canon Law, which takes years (even up to 20 years) to be fully defined
- ii. the physical and fiscal patrimony required towards the sustainability and viability of the new foundation. This is required to safeguard the members from frugal living and alms begging.

For the canonical erection of a new foundation as an Institute of Consecrated Life, it is recommended that the new foundation has:

- a stable Generalate (seat of administration) built on its own property
- at least two personal houses that qualify for the title of a religious house according to can. 608
- spread into a minimum of three dioceses
- Assets or economic base up to 20 million naira cumulative
- A stable demography of growth in membership (admissions and departure) since its inception

The approving authority should use experts to ascertain and establish these facts before approval.

7. KINDS OF FOUNDERS

Any Catholic (cf. C. 205), (including lay persons) who having received the gift of the Holy Spirit, can be the founder of a new way of following Jesus Christ more closely through the profession of the evangelical counsels by vows or other sacred bonds. Such a person must have the intention of founding an institute with notable characteristics distinguishing it from already existing ones. There have been some Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life founded by lay people, for example, Dominican Sisters of the Holy Rosary was founded by a lay person, Blessed Bartolo Longo in Pompei.

Guidelines gives five possible types of founders:¹⁶

- i. The Model type of founder: Some hero of the faith after whom persons chose to model themselves or their way of life. This is a founder by attribution or a patriarchal founder
- ii. The Charismatic founder: The person who receives the gift or charism to directly start an Institute of Consecrated Life
- iii. The Reform or Secondary founder: A member of an already existing Institute who calls for a return to the original inspiration of the founder. This person retains the constitutions of the parent Institute but takes on a new title and refers still to the original founder

¹⁶ *Guidelines*, n. 46.

- iv. The Hierarchical founder: Where an authority figure starts an Institute in which he is not a member or recommends it to others
- v. The Co-founder: Where more than one person is involved or someone assists a hierarchical founder to realise his *propositum* (intention) and may even be a founding member of the same Institute

8. BISHOP'S RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE PROCESS OF APPROVAL OF AN INSTITUTE

Recognizing the authenticity of a charism is not always an easy task, it is, nonetheless, a dutiful service that Pastors are requested to fulfill. When the Pastors of churches do not make pronouncements about these charisms, young people are misled into joining associations that do not have and may not have the stability of a Religious Institute. St. John Paul II insists that, "The faithful have the right to be informed by their pastors about the authenticity of charisms and the trustworthiness of those who present themselves as recipients thereof."¹⁷

The bishop should see his role as an attitude of service to the Holy Spirit and toward the Church whenever founders and foundresses present an association to him that seem to be a gift of the Holy Spirit. As a teacher and guide, the bishop has the responsibility of carefully discerning and assisting so that the plan, if it is in line with the norms set down by the Church, is realized in the best possible manner (cf. c. 605). In the recent document, *The Church Rejuvenates*, from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Apostolic See underscores the meticulous and slow nature of this discernment process. "This process is time consuming. It requires an adequate period to pass in order to authenticate the charisms, which must be submitted to serious discernment until they are recognized as genuine."¹⁸ It enunciates further, "the reality of the group that arises from the charism must have the proper time to grow and mature. This would extend beyond the period of initial enthusiasm until a stable configuration arises."¹⁹

No canonical law obliges the bishop to comply with the request of promoters of a new foundation. It does, however, fall within his responsibility not to extinguish or to alter a gift of the spirit which is truly such. At the very beginning, the bishop is called upon to deal with a reality which is not of his own making, a reality whose implementation requires his approval (c. 575).

The process of discernment and supervision of charismatic gifts can be difficult for the competent authority journeying with an association towards its approval. The following canons will assist the bishop in his judgment, cc. 575, 576, 578, 586, 587, and 605.

¹⁷ John Paul II, *Catechesis* (9 march, 1994), 6: *Insegnamenti* 17/1 (1994), 641.

¹⁸ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *The Church Rejuvenates, Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, Letter to the Bishops regarding the relationship between Hierarchical and Charismatic Gifts in the Church, no. 17.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Guidelines expresses a two-fold responsibility of the bishop in the accompaniment of these associations. These are the juridical and paternal dimensions. The diocesan bishop (as well as the Episcopal Conference and the Supreme Pontiff) gives approbation to a Religious Institute in the Church which is the juridical dimension to his responsibility. Even more important than this juridical dimension, the bishop in a certain sense is the “founding father” of the Institute. This relationship of “fatherhood” is operative in an especially intense degree during the preparatory phase of the establishment of the religious institute. Consequently, in accomplishing this dimension of paternal care the bishop should always acknowledge with due respect both the autonomy proper to the association and the charism of the association. The bishop is “father” not “lord and master”.²⁰

“Therefore, it is the duty of the bishop to weave together various elements. The bishop is to encourage the founding members and help them to discern, to understand and to be faithful to the charism gifted to them by the Holy Spirit. At the same time, it is his responsibility to verify that charism. Again, the bishop is not to suffocate the inspiration of the Holy Spirit nor the creativity and initiative of the founding members. It is not always easy to determine when the juridical and paternal roles of the bishop overlap and interfere with the charism of the Holy Spirit and with the autonomy and initiative proper to the association.”²¹

9. CRITERIA FOR DISCERNING THE CHARISMATIC GIFTS

The Apostolic See gives the criteria as set out by the Magisterium of the Church in recent years, for discerning the charismatic gifts with reference to ecclesial groups, for example, associations that desire to be approved as Religious Institutes should exhibit the following:

- a) The Primacy of the vocation of every Christian to holiness
- b) Commitment to spreading the Gospel
- c) Profession of the Catholic Faith
- d) Witness to a real communion with the whole Church
- e) Recognition of and esteem for the reciprocal complementarity of other charismatic elements in the Church
- f) Acceptance of moments of trial in the discernment of charisms
- g) Presence of spiritual fruits
- h) The social dimension of evangelization

10. FOUR-STEP PROCESS OF FOUNDING A RELIGIOUS INSTITUTE

Guidelines gives a four-step process for the establishment of a Religious Institute from a preparatory association to approval. It is a gradual process that should not be rushed. To move from one step to another requires the approval of the proper competent authority.

²⁰ *Guidelines*, n. 48

²¹ *Ibid.*

It begins by someone inspired to undertake some work of mercy which attracts some people, particularly, the young, to join him. This, normally, is within the territory of a parish. The priest is pleased with the work they are doing. The bishop comes to know about it. Happy that they are serving the diocese in a noble way, he writes them a letter of commendation.

The group continues its eminent work as new members continue to join as its popularity grows. About five years after the letter of commendation, the bishop writes them a letter of recognition. This letter recognizes the immense service they are giving to the diocese. By this time, the founder begins to write rules for them, gives them a habit, looks for some formator who is a religious to give them an integral formation. They are permitted to make professions even though their professions are not valid because they are not yet a Religious Institute. These acts of living like religious are necessary and encouraged so that by the time they are ready for approval, they would have become structured like a religious institute.

Between three and five years after the letter of recognition, the bishop can erect them a public association of Christ's faithful by a decree. This decree makes them juridical persons in the Church with rights and duties. It authorizes them, in their apostolate, to act in the name of the Church.

Between five and seven years after erecting them a public association, the bishop can approve them as a religious institute. Before approval, he would need to evaluate their rules and statutes to make sure there is nothing in them contrary to canon law. He would also need to consult with the Apostolic See. This four-step process is not rushed. The Apostolic See wants the process, from beginning to the time of approbation, to take at least twenty years. It is necessary to give the new religious institute a solid foundation. A Religious Institute that would last thousands of years should not be rushed or allowed to have a weak foundation. Bishops should take time to journey with the founders and foundresses. To accompany them, bishops should have as his advisers, a canonist, a theologian and a psychologist, one of whom should be a religious.

11. CONSULTATION WITH THE APOSTOLIC SEE

The following are the checklist that should be in place before the diocesan bishop approaches the Apostolic See for consultation:

- a) They have stayed at least twenty years in the process of becoming a religious institute
- b) They have capacity for continuous existence (they have vocations)
- c) They have at least forty members, with some members in perpetual profession and others in temporary profession. They should include pictures of members in their habits

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- d) They should have some governance structures, for example, they should have conducted general chapter(s) that elected superior general and council. (Members obtain these offices through election).
- e) They must present evidence of financial viability and sustainability

In conclusion, religious life is a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church. It is an expression of the charismatic life of the Church. Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life are like a mosaic of great beauty on the landscape of the Church. The Holy Spirit continues to give charisms to individuals to accomplish the needs of the Church. The competent authorities, particularly, the diocesan bishops are constantly to discern new associations that want to become Institutes of Consecrated Life. They are to accompany them, and give approbation to those they judge to have fulfilled the necessary conditions for approval. They are to duly follow the process and not allow founders and foundresses to pressure them into giving a hasty approval. The competent ecclesiastical authorities are to be vigilant in their dioceses to make sure young people who have genuine vocations but are ignorant of the status of these associations are not deceived. Associations that are abusive and deceitful should be proscribed immediately. Those asking candidates or members to bring huge amounts of money before admission or profession have no business in the Church. Bishops need to be vigilant and to act with dispatch.