



TRAINING REFLECTION
October-November 2023

The responsibility of governance within lay associations: An ecclesial service

Introduction: background to this reflection

In recent years, allegations of abuse of power within the governing bodies of international lay associations have been brought to the attention of the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life (hereafter “LFL Dicastery”). The mission of this Dicastery is to support the work and development of international associations of the lay faithful such as AIC.

In this context, the LFL Dicastery stated that *“the absence of limits in terms of office favours forms of appropriation of the charism, personalisation, centralisation and expressions of self-referentiality which can easily cause serious violations of personal dignity and freedom, and even real abuses”* and that *“bad government inevitably creates conflicts and tensions which injure communion and weaken missionary dynamism”*¹.

This assessment led the LFL Dicastery to enact a new General Decree² designed to promote a change in generations inside the governing bodies of associations, through a rotation of responsibilities, as experience has shown that this *“benefits the vitality of the association. It provides an opportunity for creative growth and stimulates investment in training. It reinvigorates faithfulness to the charism, breathes new life and efficacy to the interpretation of the signs of the times, and encourages new and updated paths of missionary action”*¹.

In September 2021, the LFL Dicastery held a Symposium of international leaders of ecclesial movements and associations on the theme: *“The responsibility of governance within lay associations. An ecclesial service”*. Representatives from a wide range of associations were invited to reflect together on the exercise of authority in lay movements from an ecclesial perspective. Pope Francis introduced the day with a beautiful message³, several excerpts of which are included in this training reflection.

¹ Explanatory Note accompanying the new Decree mentioned below:

<http://www.laityfamilylife.va/content/dam/laityfamilylife/Pdf/decreto-mandati-governo/ENG%20NotaEsplicativa%2001.06.2021%20DEF.pdf>

² General Decree “The Associations of the Faithful” of 11th June 2021 – Prot. N. 2021/466

<http://www.laityfamilylife.va/content/dam/laityfamilylife/Pdf/decreto-mandati-governo/ENG%20Decreto%20Generale%2001.06.2021%20DEF.pdf>

³ Address by Pope Francis on 16th September 2021 (Annex 1)

<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/september/documents/20210916-associazioni-fedeli.html>

The **aim** of this training reflection is to **share some important recommendations on good governance** from this Symposium and the General Decree. These recommendations are applicable at all levels of our association: international, national and local.

The ecclesial mission of lay associations

The Pope reminds us that as members of international associations of the faithful we have a true ecclesial mission of our own:



*“With devotion you endeavour to **live out and make fruitful** those **charisms** that the Holy Spirit, through your founders, granted to all the members of your groups, **to the benefit of the Church and of the many men and women to whom you dedicate yourselves in the apostolate.**”*

*“You are a clear sign of the vitality of the Church. You represent a **missionary force** and a **presence of prophecy** that gives us hope for the future.”*

*“You too [...] have the responsibility of **building the future of the holy faithful people of God.**”*

The members of Executive Boards are therefore invited to use their gifts in the best possible way and to exercise their authority in a manner consistent with their ecclesial mission, that is, as a service dedicated to achieving their own objectives and aimed towards the good of their members.

Governance and the call to serve

The notion of **service** is a fundamental and necessary part of governance in ecclesial realities.

In carrying out the role of governance entrusted to us, the Pope reminds us that we must *“learn to be true **servants of the Lord and of our brothers and sisters**”*. We are called to humility, to docility to the will of God, of which Jesus gave us the example.

This is a **service**:

- ⇒ **To the person**: to seek people’s well-being, their human and spiritual growth, especially for employees, and ensure that they have dignified living and working conditions, that their freedom is protected, etc. (e.g. adequate rest, minimum economic independence, social security, etc.).
- ⇒ **To the specific charism** of the association.
- ⇒ **To the Church’s mission of evangelisation**: to help always keep in mind the purpose of the association, to bring God to those who are most in need.

Governance at the service of the charism

The charism is a **gift inspired by the Holy Spirit**, and is aimed at an encounter with Christ.

The **charism of the founder** is always intended to be passed on and to become a **collective** charism.

The charism belongs to all **members**, who are the **co-responsible guardians** of its observance. The charism is lived out and enlivened with what the people who join the movement bring, it is a path of constant maturing.



“Each one, where he or she is placed by the Lord, is called to make [the gifts received for the good of the Church] grow and bear fruit, confident in the fact that it is God who works all things in all people. [...] We need to trust in the Holy Spirit, who acts in the life of every association”

– Pope Francis

The president and the members of the Executive Board are the **primary servants** of the collective charism. They are not its infallible interpreters, their role is to share it.

How can we ensure that the charism is **passed on**?

- Through prayer
- By ensuring compliance with the statutes of the association
- By always reminding ourselves that Jesus is at the centre
- Thanks to the support of the Church, which guarantees the authority of the founding charism.

Pope Francis warns us against **2 obstacles** that can prevent us from being servants of God and of others:

- 1) The **desire for power**: this can be expressed in many ways (not actually delegating – only on paper – forcing one’s own re-election or that of others, staying in power forever, etc.).
- 2) **Disloyalty**: when, on the pretext of serving God and others, one serves only one’s own interests and ego.

Governance and the exercise of authority in the Church

Authority allows the community to grow. This movement is never completed.

The exercise of authority requires constant discernment and an ability to take a step back. A balance should be kept between two tensions, two extremes:

- 1) Excessive authority (I have God-given power and can do anything)
- 2) Lack of authority (I do not take on responsibility because we all have to agree)

It is sometimes inevitable that tensions arise during the exercise of a mission of governance. We are then invited to manage them with discernment, in keeping with our ecclesial mission.

Governance and the invitation to accept change, in order to improve and prepare for the future

The Pope draws our attention to the importance of accepting change in order to improve and prepare for the future:

- *“The charism to which we belong must be furthered more and more, and we must always **reflect together in order to incarnate it in the new situations we live in**. To do this, great docility is required of us, and great humility, in order to recognize our limitations and accept to change outdated ways of doing and thinking, or methods of the apostolate that are no longer effective, or forms of organization of internal life that have proved inadequate or even harmful.”*
- *“It is beneficial and necessary to **provide for a rotation in posts of governance**, and for the representation of all members in your elections.”*
- *“The future must be prepared here and now, [...] learning to listen and to **discern the present time** with honesty and courage, and with the willingness to engage in **a constant encounter with the Lord, a constant personal conversion**.”*

Governance and term limits

In order to promote a healthy renewal of governing bodies and prevent appropriations that have given rise to violations and abuses in the past, the LFL Dicastery decided it was necessary to **regulate the terms of office** of governing bodies in terms of the length and number of terms, as well as the representativeness of the governing bodies. The General Decree “The Associations of the Faithful” was therefore enacted on 11th June 2021.

The **AIC Constitution** already provided for a limit on the length of board members’ terms of office. A **new provision** aimed at complying with certain new requirements in this field imposed by the 2021 General Decree was approved at the International Assembly of AIC Delegates 2023.⁴

⁴ See article 12 d) al. 3 of the AIC Constitution and article 13 d) al. 3 and 4 of the AIC Canonical Statutes.

Conclusion

Our mission as Executive Board: to prepare for the future

- We **plant the seeds** of what will grow and develop when we are no longer around.
- It is important to **learn to withdraw**, to make room for other people who will in turn contribute their talents. Former board members can play an essential role in the renewal of management teams, encouraging “creative growth” in the association and “new and updated paths of missionary action”.
- It is necessary to **provide training on governance as an ecclesial service to all AIC volunteers**, taking into account the **reality of today’s Church**:
 - ⇒ so that we can give them responsibilities within our association later, at all levels (local, national and international);
 - ⇒ so that each volunteer can contribute to setting up a good Executive Board at all levels of our association.
- We are invited to **put into practice and pass on the spirit of the General Decree** (limiting the length and number of terms of office of board members) **at all levels** of the association.



Questions to discuss in your groups:

1. What caught your attention the most?
2. What are the main challenges related to governance in your group/association?
3. What training in good governance do you offer to your association’s volunteers?
4. How can we ensure that employees of AIC associations work in decent conditions? If necessary, what can we do to improve their working conditions?
5. What more could we do to spread the spirit of the General Decree within our association and encourage the renewal of leaders within our teams as requested by the Dicastery?



“The work done by lay people is enormous, especially since Vatican II”

“Without lay people, there would be no Church today! They are the ones who make it progress, who drive forward the development of social and educational programmes”

*– Cardinal K. Farrell,
Prefect of the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life,
Vatican, 16th September 2021*

Reflection compiled by Tayde de Callataÿ, August 2023



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE MEETING OF MODERATORS OF LAY ASSOCIATIONS,
ECCLESIAL MOVEMENTS AND NEW COMMUNITIES**

Synod Hall

Thursday, 16 September 2021

[Multimedia]

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome!

I cordially greet His Eminence Cardinal Kevin Farrell, and I thank him for the words he addressed to me. And thank you to you all, for being present despite the inconveniences caused by the pandemic and sometimes by the bad feeling that this decree has perhaps sown in some people's hearts. I also greet and thank those who are participating via video link, most of whom were unable to travel due to the limitations still in force in many countries. I don't know how the Secretary managed to return from Brazil! Later you will have to explain to me.

[The Secretary answers: In quarantine].

1. I wished to be here, first and foremost, to say thank you! Thank you for your presence as laypersons, men and women, young and elderly, committed to living and bearing witness to the Gospel in the everyday realities of life, in your work, in many different contexts – education, social commitment, and so on, in the street, at railway terminals, there, you were all there – this is the vast field of your apostolate, it is your evangelization. And we must understand that evangelization is a mandate that comes from Baptism, the Baptism that makes us priests together, in the priesthood of Christ; the priestly population, no? And we must not wait for the priest to come, for the priest to evangelize, the missionary... Yes, they do great good, but whoever has been baptized has the task of evangelizing. And you have reawakened this with your movements. And this is very good. Thank you.

During recent months, you have seen with your own eyes and touched with your hands the sufferings and anguish of many men and women, due to the pandemic, especially in the poorest countries, where many of you are present. One of you spoke with me about this. So much poverty and destitution... I think of us here in the Vatican – everything is good, isn't it? – who complain when our meal is not cooked well, when ... there are people who have nothing to eat. I am grateful to you because you have not stopped; you have not stopped bringing your solidarity, your help, your evangelical testimony even during the hardest months, when the level of contagion was very high. Despite the restrictions due to the necessary preventative measures, you did not give up: on the contrary, I know that many of you redoubled your efforts, adapting to the real situations you have, and had before you, with that creativity that comes from love, because those who feel loved by the Lord love without measure. We have seen this “without measure” in so many religious sisters, in many consecrated women, in many priests and in many bishops. I am thinking of a bishop who ended up intubated because he always wanted to stay with his people. He is now slowly recovering. You and all the people of God stood together in this, and you were there. None of you said, “No, I can't go, because my founder thinks differently”. So, no founder: here there was the Gospel that called, and everyone went forth. Thank you very much. You have been witnesses to “that (blessed) common belonging, of which we cannot be deprived: our belonging as brothers and sisters”. There are no half measures.

2. As members of associations of the faithful, of international ecclesial movements and other communities, you have a genuinely ecclesial mission. With devotion you endeavour to live out and make fruitful those charisms that the Holy Spirit, through your founders, granted to all the members of your groups, to the benefit of the Church and of the many men and women to whom you dedicate yourselves in the apostolate. I think especially of those who, finding themselves in the existential peripheries of our societies, experience abandonment and solitude in their own flesh, and suffer as a result of their many material needs and of moral and spiritual poverty. It will do us all good to remember every day not only the poverty of others, but also, and above all, our own. There is something about Mother Teresa that often comes to mind, no? Yes, she was a religious sister, but this happens to us all if we are on the street. When you go to pray and feel nothing. I call it that spiritual atheism, where everything is dark, everything seems to say: “I have failed, this is not the way, this is just an illusion”... but, the temptation, of that atheism, when it comes in prayer. Poor Mother Teresa suffered greatly because it is the devil's revenge that we go there, to the peripheries where Jesus is, indeed where Jesus was born, wasn't He? We prefer a sophisticated Gospel, a distilled Gospel. And this is not the Gospel. The Gospel is this. Thank you. It will do good to us all to think of those forms of poverty.

You are too, though with the limits and sins of every day – thanks to God, that we are sinners and that God gives us the grace of recognizing our sins and also the grace of asking or going to the confessor. This is a great grace: do not lose it... though with these limits, you are a clear sign of the vitality of the Church. You represent a missionary force and a presence of prophecy that gives us hope for the future. You too, along with the pastors and all the other lay faithful, have the

responsibility of building the future of the holy faithful people of God. But always remember that building the future does not mean coming out of the today that we are living in! On the contrary, the future must be prepared here and now, it is “in the kitchen”, learning to listen and to discern the present time with honesty and courage, and with the willingness to engage in a constant encounter with the Lord, a constant personal conversion. Otherwise, one runs the risk of living in a “parallel world”, distilled, distant, far from the real challenges of society, of culture and of all those people who live alongside you and who await your Christian witness. Indeed, belonging to an association, a movement or a community, especially if they refer to a charism, should not lock us up “safe and sound”, make us feel secure, as if there were no need for any response to challenges and changes. We Christians are always all on the move, always in conversion, always in discernment. And so often we find so-called “pastoral agents”; be they bishops, priests, nuns, compromised lay people. I do not like that word. The laity is “compromised” or “not compromised”. The laity are active in something. But there are some who confuse the journey with a tourist trip or confuse the journey with always turning in on oneself, without being able to move forward. The Gospel journey is not a tourist trip. It is a challenge: every step is a challenge and every step is a call from God, every step is - as we say in our country – “putting meat on the grill”. Always moving forward. We are always on the move, always in conversion, always discerning to do God’s will. Thinking we are “new” in the Church - this is a temptation that often happens to new congregations or movements - and therefore not in need of change, can become a false security. Even novelties soon get old! For this reason, the charism to which we belong must be furthered more and more, and we must always reflect together in order to incarnate it in the new situations we live in. To do this, great docility is required of us, and great humility, in order to recognize our limitations and accept to change outdated ways of doing and thinking, or methods of the apostolate that are no longer effective, or forms of organization of internal life that have proved inadequate or even harmful. For example, this is one of the services that General Chapters always provide to us, when they are not good you have to revise them, right? ... in the assembly, I don't know what you call them, I am not sure.

But now we come to the point, to what you have been waiting for.

3. [The Decree on International Associations of the Faithful](#), promulgated on 11 June this year, is a step in this direction. But does this decree imprison us? Does it deny us our freedom? No, this Decree urges us to accept some changes and to prepare the future, starting from the present. At the origin of this decree there is not some theory of the Church or lay associations that you want to apply or impose, is there? No, there is not. It is the very reality of the last few decades that has shown us the need for the changes that the Decree asks of us. And I will tell you something about this experience of the last few decades of the post-Council period. In the Congregation for Religious they are studying the religious congregations, the associations that were established in this period. It's curious, it's very curious. Many, many, with a novelty that was great, ended up in very difficult situations: they have ended up under apostolic visitation, they have ended up with terrible sins, they have been placed under commission ... And they are performing a study. I do

not know if you can publish this, but you know better than I do from clerical chatter what these situations are. But there are many and not only are these great ones that we know, which are scandalous, the things that they did to seem like an entirely different Church - it seemed that way, didn't it? The Redemptorists ... - but also small ones. In my country, for example, three of them have already been dissolved and all of them have ended up in the dirtiest things. They offered salvation, didn't they? They seemed to ... Always with that thread of disciplinary rigidity. That's important. And this has led me ... And this reality of the last decades has shown us a series of changes to help, changes that the Decree asks of us. Today, therefore, starting from that Decree, you are focusing on a theme that is important not only for each of you, but for the whole Church: "The responsibility of governance in lay groups. An ecclesial service". To govern is to serve. The exercise of governance within associations and movements is a theme that is particularly close to my heart, especially considering - what I said earlier - the cases of abuse of various kinds that have occurred in these realities and that always find their root in the abuse of power. This is the origin: the abuse of power. Not infrequently the Holy See, in recent years, has had to intervene, launching difficult processes of rehabilitation. And I am thinking not only of these very ugly situations, which make a lot of noise, but also of the diseases that come from the weakening of the founding charism, which becomes lukewarm and loses its capacity for attraction.

4. The positions of governance entrusted to you in the lay groups to which you belong are none other than a call to serve. But what does it mean for a Christian to serve? On a number of occasions, I have had the opportunity to point out two obstacles that a Christian may encounter on his journey and which prevent him from becoming a true servant of God and of others (cf. Morning meditation at the Casa Santa Marta, 8 November 2016).

5. The first is the "lust for power", when this lust for power makes you change the nature of service in governance. How many times have we made others feel our "lust for power"? Jesus taught us that the one who commands must become like the one who serves (cf. *Lk 22:24-26*) and that "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (*Mk 9:35*). Jesus, in other words, overturns the values of worldliness, of the world.

Our desire for power is expressed in many ways in the life of the Church; for example, when we believe, by virtue of the role we have, that we have to take decisions on all aspects of the life of our association, diocese, parish, congregation. We delegate tasks and responsibilities for certain areas to others, but only in theory! In practice, however, delegation to others is emptied by the eagerness to be everywhere. And this desire for power nullifies all forms of subsidiarity. This attitude is ugly and ends up emptying the ecclesial body of its strength. It is a bad way of "disciplining". And we have seen it. So many, and I'm thinking of the congregations I know the most, superiors, superiors general who eternalize themselves in power and do a thousand, a thousand things to get re-elected again and again, right? Even changing the constitutions ... And behind it there is a desire for power. This does not help; this is the beginning of the end of an association, of a congregation.

Perhaps some may think that this “desire” does not concern them, that it does not happen in their own association. Let us bear in mind that the Decree on International Associations of the Faithful is not only addressed to some of the realities present here, but is for all, without exception. For all. There are not some who are more or less good than others, perfect or not: all ecclesial realities are called to conversion, to understand and implement the spirit that animates the provisions given to us in the Decree. I have two images of this. Two historical images. That nun who was at the entrance to the Chapter and said: “If you vote for me, I will do this for you”. They buy power. And then, a case that seems strange to me, no?, such as: “The spirit of the founder has descended upon me”. But it sounds like a prophecy from Isaiah, doesn't it? “He has given him to me! I must go forth alone or only because the founder has given me his mantle, like Elijah to Elisha. And you, yes, do the voting, but I am in charge”. And this happens! I'm not talking about fantasies. This happens today and in the Church.

The experience of being close to your realities has taught us that it is beneficial and necessary to provide for a rotation in posts of governance, and for the representation of all members in your elections. Even in the context of consecrated life there are religious institutes which, by keeping the same people in posts of governance, have not prepared for the future; they have allowed abuses to creep in and are now experiencing great difficulties. I am thinking, you will not know it [ever?] but they have an institute where their leader was called [Amabilia?]. The institute ended up being called 'hatebilia' because the members realized that the woman was a “Hitler” in a dress.

6. Then there is another obstacle to true Christian service, and this one is very subtle: disloyalty. We encounter it when someone wants to serve the Lord but also serves other things that are not the Lord. And behind other things, there is always money, is there not? It is a bit like playing a double game! We say in words that we want to serve God and others, but in fact we serve our ego, and we bend to our desire to appear, to obtain recognition, appreciation... Let us not forget that true service is gratuitous and unconditional, it knows no calculations or demands. Also, true service habitually forgets the things it has done to serve others. And it happens, doesn't it? All of you have had this experience, when you are thanked, and you ask “What for?” – “For what you have done ...” – “But what have I done?” ... And then it comes to mind. It is service. Full stop.

And we fall into the trap of disloyalty when we present ourselves to others as the sole interpreters of the charisma, the sole heirs of our association or movement - that case I mentioned earlier - or when, believing ourselves to be indispensable, we do all we can to hold posts for life; or again when we claim to decide *a priori* who our successor should be. Does this happen? Yes, it happens. And more often than we think. No one is master of the gifts received for the good of the Church - we are administrators -, no one should suffocate them, let them grow with me or with what comes after me. Instead, each one, where he or she is placed by the Lord, is called to make them grow, to make them and bear fruit, confident in the fact that it is God who works all things in all people (cf. *1 Cor* 12:6) and that our true good bears fruit in ecclesial communion.

7. Dear friends, in carrying out the role of governance entrusted to us, let us learn to be true servants of the Lord and of our brothers and sisters, let us learn to say “we are unworthy servants” (Lk 17:10). Let us keep in mind this expression of humility, of docility to God's will, which does so much good to the Church and recalls the right attitude for working in it: humble service, of which Jesus gave us the example, washing the disciples' feet (cf. Jn 13:3-17; Angelus, 6 October 2019).

8. In the Dicastery document reference is made to the founders. This seems very wise. But, founders should not be changed; keep going forward. Simplifying a little, I would say that we need to distinguish, in ecclesial movements (and also in religious congregations), between those that are in the process of formation and those that have already acquired a certain organic and juridical stability. They are two different realities. The former also, the institutes, the former have a living founder or foundress.

Although all institutes - whether religious or lay movements - have the duty to verify, in assemblies or chapters, the state of the foundational charism and make the necessary changes in their own legislation (which will then be approved by the respective Dicastery), in institutes in formation - and I say in formation in the broadest sense; institutes that have a living founder, and for this reason the Decree speaks of the founder for life, doesn't it? Therefore, the document speaks of a certain stability of the superiors during this phase. It is important to make this distinction in order to be able to move more freely in discernment.

We are living members of the Church and for this we need to trust in the Holy Spirit, who acts in the life of every association, of every member, acts in each one of us. Hence the trust in the discernment of charisms entrusted to the authority of the Church. Be aware of the apostolic power and prophetic gift that are handed over to you today in a renewed way.

Thank you for listening. And one thing: when I read the draft of the Decree, which I then signed - the first draft -, I thought. “But this is too rigid! It lacks life, it lacks ...”. But, dear friends, that's the language of canon law! And here it is a thing of law, it is a thing of language. But we must, as I have tried to do, see what this language, the law, means. That is why I wanted to explain it well. And also to explain the temptations that lie behind it, which we have seen and which do so much harm to the movements and also to religious and lay institutes.

Thank you for listening, and thank you to the Dicastery for the Laity, the Family and Life for organising this meeting. I wish you all good work and a good meeting. Say whatever comes to you from the heart in this. Ask the things you want to ask, clarify situations. This meeting is for doing this, to build up the Church, for us. And do not forget to pray for me, because I need it. It is not easy to be Pope, but God helps. God always helps.

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