

**THE SERVICE OF AUTHORITY
AND OBEDIENCE: THE CANONICAL
VISITATION OF MAJOR SUPERIORS
CANON 628 §§1, 3**

Introduction

The recent apostolic visitation of women religious in the United States has aroused much interest, queries, concern, and anxiety depending on the perspectives of individuals¹. The decision of Cardinal Franc Rodé, Prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL), to conduct an apostolic visitation has as its purpose to learn the quality of religious life in the United States. However, the consternation on the part of many women religious because of the Visitation causes them to lose sight of a significant document of that same Congregation almost three years in the making. «The Service of Authority and Obedience»² (Instruction) reflects on the

¹ Cf. CICLSAL, «Working Document for Vatican Study of U.S. Institutes of Women Religious», *Origins* 39/11 (2009) 177-182; <http://apostolicvisitation.org>, accessed 4/14/10; K. HUGHES, «The Apostolic Visitation: An Invitation to Intercultural Dialogue», *Review for Religious* 69/1 (2010) 16-30; C. MILLEA, «The Apostolic Visitation of Institutes of Women Religious», *Review for Religious* 69/1 (2010) 6-15; and S.M. SCHNEIDERS, «Why We Stay(ed)», *Ministries in the Church – Concilium* 46 (2010) 119-130.

² CICLSAL, Instruction The Service of Authority and Obedi-

dynamic unity and interplay of authority and obedience in the journey of religious towards union with God and one's neighbor. The Instruction approaches this profound subject from three perspectives: the individual religious³, the communal life of the members⁴, and the mission of religious institutes in light of their patrimonies, models of governance, and the socio-cultural environments in which they serve⁵. Furthermore, it describes the poised tension between authority and obedience resulting from the more recent emphasis on personal autonomy and self-fulfillment vis-à-vis the traditional insistence on uniformity and conformity⁶. The document seems less an instruction, i.e., a clarification of the norms of law and methods to carry them out⁷, than a spiritual treatise on authority and obedience based on

ence, *Origins* 38/5 (2008) 65-83. The Instruction had its inception at the plenary session of CICLSAL, September 28-30, 2005 and was promulgated by Cardinal Franc Rodé on the Solemnity of Pentecost, May 11, 2008. See paragraph 3 of the Instruction explaining its beginnings at the 2005 plenary session. Hereafter, the numbers following the Instruction in the footnotes refer to paragraphs. Two recent articles on the topic of authority and obedience: N. BAUER, «Three Perspectives on Obedience: Benedict of Nursia, Ignatius of Loyola and the 1983 Code of Canon Law», *The Jurist* 65/1 (2005) 55-97 and S. SHERIDAN, «Canonical obedience, the service of authority and the Franciscan tradition», *Analecta TOR* 183/1-4 (2010) 225-264.

³ Cf. CICLSAL, Instruction (cf. nt. 2), 4-15.

⁴ Cf. CICLSAL, Instruction (cf. nt. 2), 16-22.

⁵ Cf. CICLSAL, Instruction (cf. nt. 2), 23-29.

⁶ Cf. CICLSAL, Instruction (cf. nt. 2), 2-3.

⁷ Cf. *Codex Iuris Canonici Ioannis Pauli PP. II promulgatus*, Città del Vaticano 1983. It should be noted that only eleven canons are referenced in the eighty-two footnotes of the Instruction: canons 573, 590 §2, 601, 602, 607, 617, 618, 619, 631 §1, 663 §1, 673.

the life and actions of Christ⁸. It recognizes the interrelatedness of authority and obedience and the listening and openness required for communal discernment and the effective exercise of authority in making the final decision⁹.

This article will attempt to situate this significant Instruction within the context of the canonical visitation of major superiors (cf. can. 628 §§1, 3)¹⁰ and their pastoral responsibilities within that institution in: 1) encouraging individual religious in their ongoing formation, 2) fostering community life in local houses, and 3) promoting the religious' apostolic service within the local church. To do this effectively, the article will, first, describe the institution of canonical visitation of major superiors as intended by the supreme legislator and, second, pose some considerations for major superiors in this important apostolic responsibility within the three areas discussed in the recent Instruction. Hopefully, it will draw attention to the importance of this recent document from CICLSAL¹¹ and the merits of

⁸ Cf. S. HOLLAND, «Balancing Code and Culture: Select Issues in Religious Governance», in *Essays in Honor of Sister Rose McDermott, S.S.J.*, ed. R.J. Kaslyn = *Institutiones Iuris Ecclesiae* 1 (2010) 168-200. The author makes some interesting observations on the Instruction on pp. 176-184.

⁹ Cf. CICLSAL, Instruction (cf. nt. 2), 5, 7, 8, 9-11, 20; see also canon 618.

¹⁰ While this article will focus on the canonical visitation of major superiors, other articles might explain: 1) the right and obligation of the diocesan bishop to visit *sui iuris* monasteries subject to him (can. 615) and houses of institutes of diocesan right (can. 628 §2, 1°, 2°), and 2) the right and obligation of the diocesan bishop to visit the apostolic works of all religious within the particular church as well as their churches and oratories habitually attended by the Christian faithful (can. 683 §1).

¹¹ Too often religious superiors neglect an important responsibil-

the canonical visitation of major superiors well prepared and carefully executed¹².

1. The Canonical Visitation of Major Superiors

Canon 628 §§1, 3 reaffirms a fundamental institution in religious institutes¹³, the right and obligation of superiors designated in the proper law to visit the houses¹⁴ and members of their respective institutes in accord with the norms of proper law. The canonical visitation is a serious obligation of superiors in their pastoral care

ity prescribed in canon 592 §2 of the Code of Canon Law: the promotion of knowledge and observance of documents of the Holy See pertaining to their members.

¹² This writer is convinced that if the canonical visitation by major superiors was carried out expeditiously, there would be little need for an apostolic visitation.

¹³ For a brief but excellent account of visitation in monasteries and religious institutes from the Patristic Era to the present, see J.P. BEAL, «Apostolic Visitation», *The Jurist* 49 (1989) 347-398. See especially 361-365. Beal traces the responsibility of the visitation of religious by the diocesan bishops in Council of Chalcedon in 451, to the Holy See and general chapters of religious institutes by the twelfth century. The latter constituted *visitors*, until finally with the Council of Trent in 1563 prescribed that abbots primate and major superiors had the right of visitation. The purpose of the visitation was fraternal correction and warning for inappropriate behavior resultant in medicinal penalties and/or decrees or precepts for reformation. Provision for the canonical visitation of monasteries and religious institutes by abbots primate and major superiors perdures in the universal legislation in the 1917 Code of Canon Law (cann. 511-513) and in the 1983 Code of Canon Law (can. 628 §§1, 3).

¹⁴ "Houses" would be those in both canons 608 and 609, i.e., *domus*, both those properly designated by the competent superior (canon 608) and the canonically erected houses (canon 609).

of the members and their supervision of the common life and works of the institute¹⁵. This right and obligation applies to all major superiors as well as the abbots primate and superiors of monastic congregations (cf. can. 620). Such a serious obligation, if neglected for a significant period of time, could be punishable in accord with the norm of law (cf. can. 1389 §2)¹⁶.

Carried out with competent planning and pastoral solicitude, the canonical visitation can lead to greater communication between the members and their major superiors as well as prompting members to examine the quality of their communal life and service to the local church in their various corporate and individual apostolates¹⁷. Besides encouraging individual members in their ongoing formation in Christ and challenging the local community to greater vitality, the major superior pro-

¹⁵ Apart from the two articles cited in this article by Holland (see note 17) and Gardin (see note 55) very few articles could be obtained on the subject of the canonical visitation of major superiors. See the listings of canon 628 from 1983 to 2008 in *Commentarium pro Religiosis* 89 (2008) 65. See also D.J. ANDRÉS, *Il Diritto dei Religiosi. Commento Esetico al Codice*, Roma 1999, 730-732, Appendix III. The author lists bibliography according to the various canons.

¹⁶ It is noteworthy that in the CCEO, canon 420 §3 provides that, if the major superior having the right of visitation and having been warned by the local hierarch still neglects to visit, the local hierarch must visit the religious houses. Since the diocesan bishop has the right and obligation to visit *sui iuris* monasteries under his care (can. 615) and houses of institutes of diocesan right, even with respect to religious discipline (can. 628 §2), it would seem he could warn the major superior in this regard.

¹⁷ Cf. S. HOLLAND, «Visitation in Religious Communities: A Service of Communion», *CLSA Proceedings* 61 (1999) 161-178. See especially 161-163.

motes both the corporate and individual apostolic commitments of the institute at the local levels. If carefully prepared on the part of the major superior and received with openness and trust on the part of the individual members (cf. can. 628 §3), the canonical visitation would seem second only to the celebration of a chapter in the religious institute in witnessing to the unity and charity of the members, fostering the patrimony of the institute, and encouraging appropriate renewal¹⁸.

The canonical visitation is ordinarily carried out by major superiors, the supreme moderator and the provincial superior, as well as other major superiors prescribed in the proper law of the institute¹⁹. In large institutes in which provinces are in various countries, the superior general or supreme moderator may be able to visit the houses in the various provinces once during his or her term of office. The superior general may delegate a counselor or another responsible religious to assist with some of these visitations (cf. can. 137 §1). However, it would seem that the one delegated for such a responsible duty

¹⁸ Canon 631 §1 provides that the general chapter is to be composed in such a way that it represents the entire institute and becomes a true sign of its unity in charity: «[...] ita efformetur ut totum institutum repraesentans, verum signum eiusdem unitatis in caritate evadat». Beal notes that Paul VI recognized the visitation as “an act of the apostolate”, more a pastoral visit than one to administer admonitions. Gradually, this shift took place in canonical visitations of dioceses. See J.P. BEAL, «Apostolic Visitation» (cf. nt. 13), 359-360.

¹⁹ While the '83 CIC names the supreme moderator and provincial superior as major superiors (can. 620), this would not preclude the proper law of an institute from designating other major superiors in the institute, e.g., vice-provincials, regional superiors, etc. One would have to study the proper law to know the major superiors in a particular institute and their obligation in this regard.

would be required to submit a detailed report of the visitation to the proper major superior. At the provincial level, the major superior is expected to visit the houses and members more frequently, i.e., annually or semi-annually, in accord with the norms of proper law. Carefully prepared reports on the members, houses, apostolic works, and the financial condition of the houses and provinces are crucial for the effectiveness of the visitation and the information needed by the major superior for competently addressing the concerns of the members, the state of local communities, and the direction of the apostolic works of the institute in a given area. Consequently, it would be important to draw up a report after each house visited, rather than wait until the entire institute or province is visited. Essential facts garnered from the visitation assist major superiors in utilizing the members' gifts fully, providing adjustments in the common life of the houses, and improving service to the local churches.

Thorough reports on the visitation can be made only if a careful agenda is planned at the appropriate levels (generalate or provincialate) and sent to the provinces or local houses in due time for the visitation. The agenda should include a theme, perhaps based on the last chapter, the time of the visitation, and a listing of times the visitor will meet with the religious. The agenda could also include recommended passages from Sacred Scripture or the proper law of the institute and identify some of the concerns the major superior will address with the individual members in order that they can prayerfully reflect on the issues and prepare for the visitation. Such items could be derived from the Code of Canon Law, Chapter IV, «The Obligations and Rights of Institutes and Their Members» (cann. 662-672), as well as Chapter V, «The Apostolate of Institutes» (cann. 673-683)

described in subsequent paragraphs of this article. Likewise, the norms of the proper law of the institute regarding the ongoing formation of the members, communal life, and the apostolic works of the institute could contribute to the content of the visitation.

Ordinarily, the major superior meets with each member of the local community first, the local superior being the last to be interviewed²⁰. Following these individual meetings, a final conference with all the members of the community visited concludes the visitation of the house. During the time of the visitation, the major superior should be prepared to meet with any member living apart from the institute (cf. can. 665 §1) or on exclaustation (cf. cann. 686-687) and residing in the area. Finally, the major superior should make appointments in advance and meet with the diocesan bishop, pastors, and those officials responsible for supervising and coordinating the services of the religious in the particular church²¹.

As stated above, a well executed visitation should encourage the members in their vocation and obtain information regarding issues of a personal, communal, or apostolic nature that may need particular attention

²⁰ This arrangement affords the major superior the advantage of hearing each member's personal account first and then a more objective perspective from the superior of the house, responsible for the individual religious, the spirit and order of the house, and some, though limited, knowledge of the apostolates offered by the members to the local church.

²¹ In some instances and where feasible, the metropolitan in the United States holds an annual meeting of the bishops of the suffragan dioceses and the major superiors of religious institutes that serve the archdiocese and dioceses in the particular ecclesiastical province.

on the part of the major superior and council in missioning the members and directing the course of the institute. The following paragraphs will address some of these concerns that should be an integral part of any canonical visitation. These three divisions are in accord with the three-fold framework of the Instruction and references will be made to other appropriate papal and magisterial documents.

2. The Member and the Canonical Visitation

2.1 Ongoing Formation of the Member

A study of the Instruction would highlight the mutual dependence characteristic of the superior's conversation with the individual member during the visitation: the superior is dependent on the members for insight and information, the member is dependent on the major superior for encouragement and direction. It is a time of prayerful search together for the direction of the Lord in the life of the individual, his or her contributions to the vitality of the local community, and the apostolic service he or she renders to the particular church. Such an undertaking requires keen listening: the individual to the superior, and the superior to the individual in order to discern God's plan for the religious²². Canon 661 provides that religious are to continue their spiritual, doctrinal, and practical formation throughout their entire life, while superiors are to provide them with the means and

²² Cf. CICLSAL, Instruction (cf. nt. 2), 5, 7. See also S. HOLLAND, «Balancing Code and Culture» (cf. nt. 8), 177-178.

time to accomplish the same²³. The time of visitation enables religious, particularly those engaged in demanding apostolic service, to reflect prayerfully on their lives in preparation for the meeting with their major superior.

The visitation places the major superior in the position of a mediator, listening with the member to God's will and leading the person in the fulfillment of his or her vocation through proper direction. This is one of the more important responsibilities of major superiors, listening attentively to the members, encouraging them in their vocation, and promoting their common endeavors for the good of the institute and the Church²⁴. This awesome task can be accomplished only to the extent that both the major superior and the member are open to the will of God in prayer and the obligations of the religious vocation as described in conciliar documents, canon law, and the proper law of the institute. These guidelines support the mediation role of the superior and protect the member from arbitrary decisions on the part of the superior or personal ambitions that destroy the spiritual freedom resulting from dependence on God's will through mutual discernment²⁵.

²³ Canon 661: «Per totam vitam religiosi formationem suam spiritualem, doctrinalem et practicam sedulo prosequantur. Superiores autem eis adiumenta et tempus ad hoc procurent».

²⁴ Canon 618: «Libenter eos audient necnon eorum conspirationem in bonum instituti et Ecclesiae foveant». See also CICLSAL, Instruction (cf. nt. 2), 9-11.

²⁵ Cf. CICLSAL, Instruction (cf. nt. 2), 12: «With the intention of doing God's will, authority and obedience are not therefore two distinct realities or things absolutely opposed but rather two dimensions of the same evangelical reality, of the same Christian mystery, two complementary ways of participating in the same oblation of Christ».

This serious task can best be accomplished if the major superior has a general knowledge of the members visited. The general knowledge can be drawn from records in the personnel files of the generalate or provincialate and updated at a particular time each year. In addition to pertinent documents such as acts of cession and renunciation, a will, and living will or health directive, the file should include: information on the member's general health, educational background, past assignments and current ministry, as well as any significant event in the life of the individual religious. Finally, the personnel file should include a list of family members to be contacted in case of emergency, as well as any critical situation in the immediate family of the member. Such information will provide the major superior with a general knowledge of the members to be visited, particularly if the major superior is newly constituted in office or the delegate is recently appointed a visitor. Nothing is more damaging to a visitation than having a major superior or his or her delegate unaware that a member has had recent surgery, experienced the death of a parent or sibling, faced some traumatic life experience, or received a significant award or acknowledgement. Visitors should be aware of such extraordinary events in the lives of the members and comment on them during the course of the conversation with the individual member.

During the interview, the major superior should take cognizance of the age, health, and general contentment of the religious with his or her vocation, community life experience, and ministerial or apostolic service. The 1990 «Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes» offers an excellent summary of significant stages in the life and vocation of a religious. While admittedly flexible in accord with the human development of individu-

als, the stages are important considerations for any major superior in his or her conversations with individual members. An awareness of these stages enables the major superior to be sensitive and supportive of the religious in their ongoing formation and growth in Christ as they encounter the inevitable crises and sufferings of the human condition²⁶.

Having a general knowledge of the individual religious, the major superior can contextualize the initial part of the interview in accord with canons 662-672 of Book II, Part III, chapter IV of the Code of Canon Law, «The Obligations and Rights of the Institutes and Members». Objective questions regarding the ongoing formation of the religious can be asked in the following areas: 1) time allotted for personal prayer and spiritual reading (cf. can. 663 §§1, 3, 4)²⁷, 2) the availability of daily Eucharist (cf.

²⁶ Cf. CICLSAL, *Direttive Potissimum institutioni*, Feb. 2, 1990, in *Enchiridion della Vita Consacrata. Dalle Decretali al rinnovamento post-conciliare (385-2000)*, Milano 2001, 2873, par. 70. English translation: Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes, *Origins* 19/42 (1990) 692, par. 70, «Special Themes for Ongoing Formation». The paragraph identifies five transitional stages: 1) from initial formation to assuming the responsibilities of a more independent lifestyle, 2) the completion of ten years of perpetual profession with the possibility of habit and boredom, 3) full maturity with serious professional responsibility and the danger of individualism, 4) a time of severe personal crisis happening at any time in the life of a member, and 5) the progressive withdrawal from activity as one approaches death, the last act of obedience to the Lord. All of these stages can be lived and resolved in faith and within the Paschal Mystery of Christ. See also CICLSAL, *Instruction* (cf. nt. 2), 14c, the pastoral care of the superior referring to canon 619, in attending to the ill, restless, faint-hearted members with patience and kindness to all.

²⁷ Cf. also CICLSAL, *Instruction* (cf. nt. 2), 13b. The superior would be prohibited from asking questions regarding content pertaining to the internal forum.

can. 663 §2) and confessors (cf. cann. 630 §2, 664) and 3) provisions for an annual retreat (cf. can. 663 §5).

Regarding the obligation of the vows, general questions can be asked, for example, regarding the discretion in the use of modern technology (cf. cann. 599; 666)²⁸. Has the member all that he or she deems necessary to carry out his or her vocation (cf. can. 670)? Have any problems been experienced with the personal budget provided the members; does the religious avoid the use of unauthorized credit cards or monetary transactions foreign to the policies of the institute (cf. cann. 600; 668 §3; 639 §3)? Is the religious responsible for the temporal affairs of any person beyond the institute (cf. cann. 672, 285 §4)²⁹? Has the religious accepted any functions or offices beyond the institute without the permission of the legitimate superior (cf. cann. 601; 671)? If such objective questions on the prayer life and the obligation of the vows are sent to the houses ahead of the visitation, it affords the individual religious time to reflect on them and share his or her concerns regarding any of these topics with the major superior. This conversation can help preclude many serious difficulties in these areas experienced both by individual religious and their respective institutes.

²⁸ One thinks immediately of television, the computer, cell phones, and other devices that can endanger chastity. Likewise, such devices, if employed excessively, can rob the time required for prayer, community life, and apostolic services.

²⁹ In lay institutes of pontifical right, the proper major superior can grant this permission. It seems appropriate for major superior to review such permissions to avoid the member being consumed with such responsibilities and/or the institute being liable if the member has signed as co-owner of the temporal or there is irresponsible management of the temporal affairs of others.

2.2 *Common Life and the Member*

Following the discussion on the personal life of the individual, the major superior can focus on the member's presence and contributions to the local community (cf. cann. 602; 665 §1)³⁰. Since communal life is an essential element of religious life (cf. can. 607 §2), fostering community in the local house is a fundamental task of the religious³¹. The life of religious lived in common witnesses in a powerful way to the Church's mystery and what Christ hoped for all humanity³².

Prayer, the foundation of all community life, strengthens the bonds of love and concern among the members. The major superior can ask if the religious avails himself or herself of the common liturgical celebrations of the community, particularly the Eucharist and Liturgy of the Hours. Liturgy celebrated with the community enriches the personal prayer of the religious, even as the personal prayer of the individual religious contributes significantly to liturgical prayer celebrated in common.

Common life augments the relational dimensions of the human person, enabling the members to become adept in cooperation, collaboration, and co-responsibility in building the community, as well as strengthening the religious for engagement in mission³³. The major su-

³⁰ Cf. also CICLSAL, Instruction (cf. nt. 2), 16-22.

³¹ Cf. CICLSAL, Instruction (cf. nt. 2), 16.

³² Cf. CICLSAL, Instruction (cf. nt. 2), 18.

³³ Cf. CICLSAL, Instruction (cf. nt. 2), 19, 22. The Instruction quotes Pope John Paul II as stating: «All fruitfulness of religious depends on the quality of community life». See also CICLSAL, Documento *Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor*, in *Enchiridion* (cf. nt. 26), 3028-3070. See especially 3056, par. 54; 3069-3070, par. 71. English translation: Fraternal Life in Community, *Origins* 23/40 (1994) 693, 695-712. See especially 706-707, par. 54; 712, par. 71.

perior can inquire if the member is involved in any of the committees, commissions, or councils in specific areas that contribute to the ongoing renewal of the institute such as: initial and ongoing formation, continuing education and professional updating, apostolic services, health/wellness, etc. Likewise, it would be important for the superior to gauge the involvement of the member at the local level. Is the religious present for house meetings and engaged in the consultative process for quality decision making³⁴? Does the member respect the contributions of each of his or her brothers or sisters and recognize the authority of the local superior in making the final decision? If the member indicates difficulties with interpersonal relations with one or more of the members, the major superior, as one who has given his or her life for the many, can assist and encourage the member in accepting the various contributions of others along with their human limitations and frailty³⁵.

The major superior should enable the member to recognize the enrichment that comes with sharing common life. A deep respect for the other members shown by trust, kindness, understanding, and sincerity enables members to prefer communal values over personal projects and act co-responsibly and unselfishly not only in the local communal meetings, but also on commissions or councils in the broader institute. Likewise, these communal interchanges among the members united in common prepare them to collaborate in ministerial and apostolic services with diocesan clerics, the laity, and other religious. Other Christian faithful recognize religious as persons experienced in community life and ex-

³⁴ Cf. CICLSAL, Instruction (cf. nt. 2), 20.

³⁵ Cf. CICLSAL, Instruction (cf. nt. 2), 16, 17.

pect that they will bring this witness and contribution to the parochial and diocesan communities they serve.

The major superior can inquire as to the ability of the member to balance individual needs and communal responsibilities. Does the member express general concern for the quality of life shared with his brothers or sisters³⁶? Or does the religious have time consuming relationships or projects beyond the common life of the house that preclude participation in the community life? Is he or she generous in accepting chores that are a part of the daily living in the community, or taken up by familial interests, apostolic obligations, or other external activities that sap energy, leaving little or no quality time for communal sharing? Does the member contribute to the support and well-being of his or her brothers and sisters, taking time with them to relax, recreate, and simply enjoy the others' company³⁷?

³⁶ Cf. CICLSAL, Instruction, Starting Afresh From Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium, May 19, 2002, *Origins* 32/8 (2002) 129, 131-148. See 141-142, par. 28-29.

³⁷ CICLSAL, Instruction Starting Afresh (cf. nt. 36), 142, par. 29. While cloistered religious have stricter regulations in the proper law or from the Apostolic See (canon 667 §§2, 3), apostolic religious institutes should reserve some part of the religious house for the members alone (canon 667 §1). In addition to the dormitory or sleeping quarters of the members, the designation of a community room on the second floor or apart from areas designated for visitors to individual religious is ideal.

2.3 *Mission and the Member*

Mission demonstrates in a profound way the obedience of the religious being sent. Through one's consecration as a vowed religious, a member sent in the name of his or her institute both witnesses Christ to others and serves them in his name. It is the serious responsibility of major superiors to coordinate the gifts of each member for effective corporate and/or individual service on behalf of the institute³⁸. Does the religious recognize that being sent is both a privilege and responsibility inextricably bound to one's religious profession? Poverty sensitizes the religious to the needs of those they serve; chastity frees him or her for availability for unlimited service; while obedience prepares the religious to accept the will of God manifested through his or her superiors in being sent to complete the mission of Christ³⁹.

The first and foremost apostolate of all religious is the witness of a life totally dedicated to God through prayer and penance⁴⁰. If the religious is not sent to a corporate or individual work in the name of the institute, the service that he or she renders becomes merely a profession, unrelated to the commitment made at religious profession. Likewise, the major superior becomes a mere coordinator and supporter of the members' labors

³⁸ Cf. CICLSAL, Instruction (cf. nt. 2), 25.

³⁹ Cf. Pope JOHN PAUL II, apos. exhor. *Redemptionis donum*, March 25, 1984, in *Enchiridion* (cf. nt. 26), 2694-2731. See 2710-2713, par. 9, 14. One can find the English translation of this document on the website: www.vatican.va/holy-father/john-paul-II/apost-exhortations/hf-ip-li-exh-25031984/. Accessed 4/14/10.

⁴⁰ Canon 673: «Omnium religiosorum apostolatus primum in eorum vitae consecratae testimonio consistit, quod oratione et paenitentia fovere tenentur».

leading to their self-fulfillment⁴¹. Whether the religious serves in a corporate work of the institute or alone in a specialized service, the major superior must emphasize the responsibility of the religious as a representative of the institute witnessing its charism and promoting its mission while addressing the human needs of individuals. This can be accomplished only by a life rooted in prayer and communal living from which the religious draws strength to bring Christ to his people and his people back to Christ⁴². Likewise prayer and communal sharing grace the individual religious with an enormous capacity to give⁴³.

It would be wise for the major superior to question if a religious working in an individual apostolate experiences the support of the local community. All too often such capable religious, lacking communal support and experiencing the pressure of demanding services, tend to drift into a highly individualistic manner of living leading to gradual separation from the common life of the institute⁴⁴. The members engaged in the corporate works of the institute, be they educational, health care or a social service institutions, should strive to keep updated in

⁴¹ Cf. CICLSAL, Instruction (cf. nt. 2), 23; CICLSAL, Documento *Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor* (cf. nt. 33), 40, 48.

⁴² Cf. CICLSAL, Instruction (cf. nt. 2), 25c.

⁴³ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptionis Donum* (cf. nt. 39), 4-5, 9. Today with world-wide communication, there are needs not realized heretofore: despair, drugs, aging, abandonment, sickness, marginalization, social discrimination, natural disasters – forms of poverty in addition to traditional forms. Many of these evils dehumanize persons at a time when society and the Church teach the dignity of the human person. See CICLSAL, Instruction *Starting Afresh* (cf. nt. 36), 35.

⁴⁴ Cf. CICLSAL, Instruction (cf. nt. 2), 25c; see CICLSAL, Directive *Potissimum institutioni* (cf. nt. 26), 70c, «Full maturity».

the fields. They should recommend improvements in their specialized works in keeping with the advancements in secular society so that the apostolates meet today's standards and the people receive quality service (cf. can. 677 §1). It should be remembered that a vibrant community life has deep implications for the effectiveness of all members in their services to others. Often the demands of life in common strengthen and sustain perseverance in the midst of the discouraging experiences and strained relationships religious encounter in ministry. A rich communal experience in a local community can be a haven in which the religious finds rest, relaxation, and renewed energy to continue one's demanding service to others⁴⁵.

Since all ministry or apostolic service of religious is performed in the name and by the mandate of the Church, the major superior should inquire as to the awareness of the religious regarding the diocesan bishop's responsibility in directing the apostolic works of all those so engaged in the diocese (cf. cann. 394, 678 §1)⁴⁶. Does the religious cooperate with the diocesan clergy and other women and men religious serving in the particular diocese (cf. nt. 680)? With conciliar and postconciliar emphasis on the participation of all the Christian faithful in the teaching, sanctifying, and governing mission of Christ (cf. can. 204), diocesan bishops are focusing their efforts on the promotion of ongoing formation and education of the laity, as they increasingly contribute to the

⁴⁵ Cf. CICLSAL, Instruction (cf. nt. 2), 25c; JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptionis Donum* (cf. nt. 39), CICLSAL, Documento *Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor* (cf. nt. 33), 57.

⁴⁶ See also JOHN PAUL II, apos. exhor. *Vita consecrata*, in *Enchiridion* (cf. nt. 26), 3176-3346. See 3246-3249, par. 49.

ministerial labors and apostolic services in the Church⁴⁷. Likewise, many religious institutes have associates or associations joined to them (cf. cann. 303; 677 §2)⁴⁸. Does the religious support the work of the laity as their collaborators, encouraging them as they assume their rightful places and responsibilities in the mission of the Church⁴⁹? Recognizing and celebrating the gifts and ministries of others can be a source of immense grace for the individual religious man or woman. In this way, religious imitate Christ in a most profound way. Not only did he accept his mission from the Father in our behalf, but he invites and entrusts all of us with the continuance of that mission for the advancement of the Kingdom⁵⁰.

Those assuming the role of major superiors in religious institutes today do so at an extremely sensitive time, as there has been a gradual shift from the focus on the institutional labors of the members to a greater concern for the individual's gifts. Superiors need to maintain a delicate balance between the apostolic/ministerial needs of the institute and the competence and satisfaction of the members. Only open, sincere dialogue between the member and the superior can effect a satisfactory resolution regarding the member's assign-

⁴⁷ Cf. CICLSAL, Instruction (cf. nt. 2), 25f; USCCB, *Co-Partners in the Vineyard of the Lord – A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*, Washington (DC) 2005.

⁴⁸ See also CICLSAL, Instruction Starting Afresh (cf. nt. 36), 31.

⁴⁹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, apos. exhor. *Vita consecrata* (cf. nt. 46), 55. See also P.H. KOLVENBACH, «Jesuits and Their Lay Partners in Ministry», *Origins* 34/20 (2004) 313, 315-318.

⁵⁰ Cf. CICLSAL, *Documento Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor* (cf. nt. 33), 46; P.H. KOLVENBACH, «Jesuits and Their Lay Partners in Ministry» (cf. nt. 49), 317-318.

ment. It always remains the superior's responsibility to prescribe what is to be accomplished⁵¹.

The major superior has an obligation to listen to the members, particularly those offering recommendations for the institute's mission that benefit both the institute and the broader Church. Likewise, it is imperative that the major superior hear those religious experiencing difficulties in their service. This input serves the superior in his or her serious responsibility in directing the corporate and individual works of the institute as well as strengthening and encouraging those religious in difficult situations to accept the human condition and work towards an interdependence whereby the gifts of all are acknowledged. The major superior who encourages a balance between the essential values in religious life of prayer, community, and mission will best be able to convince a religious in a difficult apostolate that personal and communal prayer coupled with the support of a loving, joyful community strengthens him or her to overcome obstacles in apostolic or ministerial endeavors⁵².

3. The Local Superior and the Canonical Visitation

The major superior should complete the individual interviews of the members with a meeting with the local superior. The conversation with the local superior should include not only a personal interview, but also an objective appraisal of the ongoing formation of the members in the house, the quality of their commu-

⁵¹ Cf. CICLSAL, Instruction (cf. nt. 2), 25, 26.

⁵² Cf. CICLSAL, Instruction (cf. nt. 2), 25.

nal life, the financial condition of the local house⁵³, and the vibrancy of the corporate and individual ministries and/or apostolates in the particular church⁵⁴. Being human, we do not always perceive ourselves as other see us. Often, too, humility precludes a religious from offering a particular gift to the major superior, while the local superior can bring these talents of the religious to the attention of the major superior for future consideration of advanced education or specialized ministry. While the local superior may have but a limited knowledge of the corporate and individual ministries and apostolates of the members, he or she would certainly be able to provide the major superior with concerns and/or observations regarding individual members and the quality of life experienced in the local community. It would seem an opportune time for the local superior to render an account of his or her responsibility for the welfare of the members entrusted to him or her and efforts made to encourage common prayer and interdependent sharing among the members of the local community. The meeting would also enable the major superior, barring confidential information, to present to the local superior any general observations regarding the individual members, the horarium, spirit, and practices of the local community, commending such practices where appropriate and making recommendations for the future service of the local superior on behalf of the individual members and the local community.

⁵³ If the house is large, there would be a treasurer submitting this account to the local superior periodically; if the house is small, the local superior may act as the treasurer. See canon 636 §§1, 2.

⁵⁴ The local superior may not have a complete knowledge of the services rendered the local church, inasmuch as the diocesan bishop, his officials, pastors and other supervisors would monitor these.

4. Concluding Meeting with Members of the Community

Finally, the major superior should meet with the entire local community, praising them for their efforts in living out the patrimony of the institute and encouraging them in their vocations, particularly if they are living and working under difficult circumstances. In his or her role as an animator, the superior should be positive during this meeting. The community can best resolve any problems; the major superior would encourage the group to address any such issues that need attention in forthcoming house meetings. Rather than offering simple solutions to complex situations, it would be better if the major superior recommended that the members address such difficult issues within a prayerful communal discernment process, offering the local superior recommendations for their resolution⁵⁵. The visitation can conclude with a prayer of thanksgiving and a festive meal.

5. Members Living Apart and the Canonical Visitation

Finally, major superiors are obliged to keep in touch with those religious with permission to be absent from community life (cf. can. 665 §1) and those on exclaustation (cf. cann. 686-687). While there is a corresponding responsibility for the members to re-

⁵⁵ Cf. A. GARDIN, «The Canonical Visit: Practical Considerations and Indications», *Consecrated Life* 26/1-2 (2006) 287-304. See especially pp. 297-303, the author's observations on animating rather than correcting a community.

main in contact with the appropriate major superior, nevertheless, the onus falls on the major superior, given his or her office. The time of canonical visitation affords an opportunity to meet with the religious living apart from community life and residing in the particular area visited. The major superior might want to inquire as to the quality of life of the member and support him or her on behalf of the institute. Some religious may be living apart for studies; others, for an apostolate in the name of the institute; and still others, for caring for an elderly or sick parent. A religious may be hospitalized for emotional or physical illness. Whatever the reasons, the member should know of the concern and care of the institute as communicated through the major superior. There have been instances of religious losing their vocations for no other reason than a gradual loss of contact with the institute through the neglect of major superiors, as well as their own failure to maintain contact with the institute⁵⁶.

The major superior should set up an appointment and spend some time inquiring as to the quality of their lives, the opportunities for spiritual direction, time for personal prayer, their efforts to attend meetings and/or socials provided for those members living apart. The superior may well ask if they, having had this experience, have any suggestions in order to benefit religious who in the future may have to accept living apart from community life⁵⁷.

⁵⁶ This author can testify to this, having worked some thirty years with religious with permission to live apart from the common life of the institute for studies, apostolates, in the name of the institute, and/or caring for a sick parent.

⁵⁷ Cf. CICLSAL, *Documento Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor* (cf. nt. 33), 65.

Religious on exclaustation are generally making decisions as to remain or definitively depart the institute. Here again, the concern and interest of the major superior are of the utmost importance. Visiting the member, making certain they understand their canonical status (cf. can. 687), and assuring they have the proper spiritual direction and canonical advice available to make a quality decision regarding their future life are extremely important and serious obligations on the part of the major superior. Major superiors should also advise them that they have the prayers of the other members in this all important decision-making process. All too often, religious are given exclaustation for three years; the time goes by but little or no serious discernment has been made. Likewise, if there is little or no contact with those in authority in the institute, or the religious experiences animosity from his or her major superior, one can well expect that the vocation is lost.

The exclaustated religious, given concern and assistance by the major superior, may eventually make a decision to leave the institute. His or her departure and possible future service should be regarded as the institute's contribution to the broader church. A religious departing with a great love for the charism in which he or she was formed and a deep respect for the religious family that supported him or her during the discernment process has the potential of performing significant services to the Church as a lay person. On the other hand, a religious departing with a sense of estrangement or abandonment by his or her religious family through the neglect of major superiors, may have lost not only a religious vocation, but any motivation to continue as a deeply committed member of

the Christian faithful as well as any enthusiasm to contribute further to the mission of the Church⁵⁸.

Members with permission to live apart and religious on exclaustation must realize that they are not neglected in whatever circumstances they find themselves. Major superiors with the assistance of other skilled persons in the institute can plan weekends of spiritual retreat or days of prayer and sharing with other members of the institute in accord with the needs of those living apart from the common life of the institute. While distanced somewhat from the communal life of the institute due to illness, studies, caring for an ill parent, an apostolate in the name of the institute, or even discernment as to possible definitive departure; nevertheless, they are members joined to their brothers or sisters with deep bonds of spirituality. A major superior, a member of the council, or some other experienced religious should be in contact with these religious⁵⁹.

6. Officials in the Local Church and the Visitation

During the period of the visitation, the major superior should meet with the diocesan bishop, pastors, and/or other officials who supervise the apostolic and ministerial services of the religious in the respective dioceses.

⁵⁸ Cf. J. TORRES, «Procedure for the Exclaustation of a Religious», *Consecrated Life* 18/1 (1992) 47-73. See especially pp. 60-61. See also G. LAGOMARSINO, «L'esclaustazione dei religiosi nel *Codex*: l'odierna normativa di diritto sostanziale con cenni a quella previgente», *Apollinaris* 70/1-2 (1997) 169-183, especially 180.

⁵⁹ Cf. CICLSAL, Documento *Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor* (cf. nt. 33), 65.

The archbishop of the metropolitan see may convoke periodic meetings with the major superiors of the regions⁶⁰. If that be the case, the major superior would meet with the pastors or other officials in charge of the ministerial or apostolic works in which the religious work in order to determine their effectiveness. Major superiors should recognize and appreciate the diocesan bishop's role as pastor of the particular church and his responsibility for those entrusted with the mission of the church under his care. He is to promote and coordinate the various gifts in the diocese for the benefit of all. Major superiors should encourage religious in corporate or individual apostolates to be generous and willing in their response to the requests of the bishop for the needs of the people, always however, in accord with the ends of their respective institutes and the permission of the competent superiors (cf. can. 671). During the visitation a meaningful dialogue should take place between the major superior and the diocesan bishop or other officials in order that the gifts of the religious be employed effectively for the needs of the diocese (cf. can. 678 §3)⁶¹. This regular collaboration between hierarchical and religious authorities manifests the position of the religious in the heart of the Church and their contribution to its mission-effectiveness⁶². While the religious do not belong

⁶⁰ See note 21; such meetings occur in the Archdiocese of Newark (NJ).

⁶¹ See also JOHN PAUL II, apos. exhor. *Vita consecrata* (cf. nt. 46), 49.

⁶² Cf. CICLSAL, *Documento Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor* (cf. nt. 33), 60. See also CONGREGATION FOR BISHOPS, *Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops Apostolorum Successores*, Ottawa 2004, 108-116, VII, par. 98-102.

to the hierarchical structures of the Church; nevertheless, they are inextricably bound up with its life and holiness (cf. can. 207 §2)⁶³.

Conclusion

This article attempted to contextualize the recent Instruction, *The Service of Authority and Obedience* within the practical framework of the canonical visitation of major superiors. It would seem that, next to the general chapter, this is a singularly important canonical institution for the individual religious, the community visited, and the particular church as beneficiary of the witness and services of the religious in the local community. The article offered some considerations for the major superior or the delegate as he or she prepares for this serious obligation and conducts it in an orderly manner. This author hopes that all religious will read and reflect on the Instruction that prompted the writing of this article. Otherwise, it will simply serve as the basic content for articles such as this. Furthermore, this author hopes that the canonical visitation of major superiors will take on new life in religious institutes, offering encouragement to the members in their ongoing conversion to Christ, stimulating the revitalization of communal life at the local level, and encouraging renewed generosity in the witness and apostolic services religious render to the local churches. Periodic and planned visitations of major superiors at the general and provincial levels will provide valuable information for major superiors and

⁶³ See also *LG* 43-47.

their councils in missioning their members and assessing the needs for the apostolate in particular churches. Likewise, these visitations will supply content for the reports sent periodically to CICLSAL (cf. can. 592 §1)⁶⁴, thus precluding the necessity of an apostolic visitation of religious in the near future. Above all, the canonical visitation prepared and executed with care will truly reflect the service of authority and obedience. It will demonstrate to the religious the superior's care and concern for their vocation in accord with the patrimony of the institute, and it will show the major superior undertaking the visitation the generosity and fervor in which individual religious live out their daily lives in witness and service to God's people.

Rose McDERMOTT, S.S.J.

⁶⁴ See also CICLSAL, Attachment to Prot. n. SpR 640/2008, Suggested Guidelines for the Preparation of Periodic Reports on the Status and Life of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (cf. *CIC* can. 592 §1), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccscrife/documents/rc_con_ccscr-life_d. [accessed 4/13/2010].

