

**INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE, SOCIETIES  
OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, AND ASSOCIATIONS OF LAY  
FAITHFUL: THE NEED FOR COLLABORATION**

George Chidi Iheanacho, o.m.i.

Saint Paul University, Ottawa.  
giheanacho@ustpaul.ca

**Abstract**

The collaboration of Institutes of Consecrated Life (ICL) and Societies of Apostolic Life (SAL) with Associations of lay faithful is an essential dimension of the Church today. In partnership with lay faithful and associations sharing their charism and mission, ICL/SAL can drive fruitful engagement across both particular churches and the universal Church to promote synodality and missionary discipleship. Through baptism, the lay faithful have equal dignity and responsibility in the growth of the Church with their specific mission being to imbue the temporal order with the spirit of the Gospel, especially with the increasing secularization of human societies. Thus, whether public or private, the associations of lay faithful play a vital role in the promotion of Christian values and must cooperate with ecclesiastical public juridic persons. Accordingly, this paper opines that Associations of lay faithful must adhere to fundamental principles, including the universal call to holiness, the profession and promotion of the Catholic faith, communion with the pope and bishops, alignment with the Church's apostolic mission, and commitment to transforming society according to Christian values. The paper invites ICL/SAL to plan the succession of their apostolic works by integrating lay faithful and their associations, including former members and ex-seminarians. This transition requires thorough preparation, clear statutes, and modernized management to counter an eroding historical memory, complex civil law requirements, and changing societal values.

**Keywords:** Collaboration. Consecrated life. Apostolic work. Associations. Lay faithful. Apostolate. Partnership. Ex-seminarians.

### **Introduction**

Since the beginning of Christianity, Christ's disciples have always felt and experienced the need to associate or affiliate with one another to promote the cause of the Gospel. This desire has never ceased; on the contrary, it reveals itself in ever-new ways in each era. The influence of the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council and the implementation of its calls are still ongoing. Although the secularization<sup>1</sup> of hitherto Christianized societies leads the Church to ask questions and position herself to continue to be relevant, cultural exchange and the increased mobility of the world aggravate these reassessments prompting the discernment of new avenues of fruitful engagement in society.

As always, Institutes of Consecrated Life (ICL) and Societies of Apostolic Life (SAL) are well-positioned to lead this engagement in the concrete life of the Church and in the contemporary society. Thus, in the spirit of synodality and commitment to missionary discipleship, ICL/SAL, in collaboration with the lay faithful associated with their charism and mission, can set examples of cooperation and collaboration within particular churches and the Church at large.

This article intends to be a practical, informed, and timely conversation on the subject of collaboration between ICL/SAL and the lay faithful associated with them. It is also a call to think “Church-People of God,” “Church-Communion,” and “Apostolic Work-Work of the Church.” As communicating vessels, the Church and its institutions can benefit from collaborations that

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<sup>1</sup> The social process whereby there is the shift of public life away from religious rules and where religion loses its cultural and societal importance to the benefit of a worldview based solely on science and reason.

are signs of witness and evangelical presence at the heart of society.

### **Consecrated Life in the Church**

Consecrated life is understood as one of the forms of commitment of men and women in the life of the Church. It is a commitment that manifests a deeper way of attaching oneself to spiritual goods in view of God's Kingdom. This self-giving is public and canonically recognized within the Church as a stable life dedicated to honoring God, strengthening the Church, and extending the *salus animarum*. Consecrated life is an existential reminder of the world to come; it is alive and life-giving. The proper laws of each institute or society, approved by the competent ecclesiastical authority, determine the manner of witness to the profession of the evangelical counsels<sup>2</sup>.

Consecrated life is not a closed reality; on the contrary, it is open and oriented toward ever-new inspirations by the Holy Spirit<sup>3</sup>. However, three major dimensions are identifiable: institutes of consecrated life, forms of consecration approximating those of institutes of consecrated life, and new forms of consecrated life. Each category contains other specific aspects.

### **Institutes of Consecrated Life**

Consecrated life is broad. However, one major aspect is recognized as institutes of consecrated life. This category encompasses a greater part of all that has to do with consecration in the Church. Its major features are public profession of the

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<sup>2</sup> Thierry Sol (ed) et al., *Code de droit canonique bilingue et annoté*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., updated June 26, 2024 (CDCBA), (Montréal: Wilson & Lafleur, 2024), canon 573. Unless otherwise indicated, subsequent references to canons will be from this version of the Code of Canon Law.

<sup>3</sup> Amy Hereford, *See I am Making something New. New Institutes, Diocesan Hermits and Consecrated Virgins and New Forms of Consecrated Life* (Saint Louis: Religious Life Project, 2018), 23-25.

evangelical counsels through vows or other sacred bonds, separation from the world, and sometimes life in common. This category includes the eremitical (anchoretic or ascetic) life, religious institutes, and secular institutes.

### **Eremitical Life<sup>4</sup>**

Eremitical life evokes the image of the desert<sup>5</sup>, a metaphor that designates the call that God addresses to men and women, to distinguish themselves through a stricter withdrawal from the world, through silence marked by interior or exterior solitude, and through assiduity in prayer and penance<sup>6</sup>, in a more exclusive union with God. The aim is to attest that “... by fasting and penance ... man does not live by bread alone, but by the Word of God (cf. Matthew 4:4)”<sup>7</sup>, to promote the praise of God<sup>8</sup>, the salvation of the world and “... *never to lose sight of the supreme vocation*, which is to be always with the Lord”<sup>9</sup>.

Hermits may be members of ancient orders (Benedictines, Cistercians, etc.) or religious institutes, or consecrated persons directly dependent on a diocesan bishop. In the latter case, the role of the diocesan bishop is important in the public profession of the evangelical counsels: the hermit lives under the authority and care of this diocesan bishop and observes the program of life

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<sup>4</sup> Canon 603.

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 43:19: “I will make a path in the desert.”

<sup>6</sup> Canon 603.

<sup>7</sup> John Paul II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World *Vita consecrata (VC)* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, March 25, 1996), n° 7.

<sup>8</sup> Ephesians 1:6. See also Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL), *The Hermit's Way of Life in the Local Church* Ponam in deserto viam Is 43, 19 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2022), 3.

<sup>9</sup> *VC*, n° 7.

that he has given himself. Thus, the law recognizes the hermit as dedicated to God in the consecrated life<sup>10</sup>.

### Religious Institutes

Within religious institutes, there are those who are totally dedicated to contemplation and others who are involved in apostolic life; they could be women or men. On the one hand, contemplatives imitate Christ in prayer, bear witness to God's lordship over history, and prefigure the world to come. Through their silence and solitude, they listen to the Word of God, practice divine worship, personal asceticism, prayer, mortification, and the communion of brotherly love. Thus, they orient their entire lives and activities toward the one good: the contemplation of God<sup>11</sup>. On the other hand, apostolic religious renounce the world and consecrate themselves to God through a public profession of the evangelical counsels, according to specific charisms, and through forms of stable communal life. They engage in the Church through different forms of apostolate<sup>12</sup>.

The 1983 Code of Canon Law (*CIC/83*) defines this category of consecrated persons as “[...] a society in which, in accordance with their own law, the members pronounce public vows and live a fraternal life in common”<sup>13</sup>. This group is distinguished by the idea of total, exclusive and public giving of witness, of self-giving to the service of God, under the symbols of spousal union<sup>14</sup> and of unique sacrifice<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Canon 603. See also *VC*, n° 7.

<sup>11</sup> *VC*, n° 8.

<sup>12</sup> *VC*, n° 9.

<sup>13</sup> Canon 607, §2.

<sup>14</sup> A sort of mystical marriage with God. It is important to circumscribe the use of this expression given its excessive-and-sometimes-over-simplified-use by some.

<sup>15</sup> Dedication of oneself to God. See Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, November 21, 1964 (*LG*), *Acta*

### Secular Institutes

Already towards the end of the 19th century, among Christ's faithful, there was a desire to associate in groups similar to the secular institutes recognized today. Through the decree *Ecclesia Catholica*, these movements received a kind of tacit approval with consecrations recognized as private commitments<sup>16</sup>. However, with the promulgation of the Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia*<sup>17</sup>, secular institutes were officially approved as a form of consecration in the Church. As constitutive law, this apostolic constitution would be developed and supplemented the following year by the motu proprio *Primo feliciter*<sup>18</sup> and the Instruction *Cum Sanctissimus*<sup>19</sup>. However, other documents of the Magisterium<sup>20</sup> would contribute to a better understanding of secular institutes.

Canon 710<sup>21</sup> specifies that a secular institute is an institute of consecrated life through which the faithful work for the transformation of the world, not from the outside, but from the

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*Apostolicae Sedis (AAS)* 57 (1965): 5-75, n° 44, and Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life *Perfectae Caritatis*, October 28, 1965 (PC), *AAS* 58 (1966): 704-5, n° 5.

<sup>16</sup> Sacred Congregation of Bishops, *Decree of the Catholic Church*, confirmed by Leo XIII, August 11, 1889. See also Armando Oberti, "La vocation des instituts séculiers dans l'Église," *Vies consacrées* 54, n° 3 (1982): 171-80.

<sup>17</sup> Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution *Provida mater Ecclesia*, February 2, 1947, *AAS* 39 (1947): 114-24.

<sup>18</sup> Pius XII, Motu proprio *Primo feliciter*, March 12, 1948, *AAS* 40 (1948): 283-86.

<sup>19</sup> Sacred Congregation for the Religious, Instruction *Cum Sanctissimus*, March 19, 1948, *AAS* 40 (1948): 293-97.

<sup>20</sup> *CIC/17*, *CIC/83*, and Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, *The Secular Institutes. Their Identity and Mission. Document for the Plenary Congregation, 3-6 May, 1983*. In CICLSAL, *Consecration and Secularity. The Revolution brought about by Provida mater Ecclesia Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church Regarding Secular Institutes*, (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2017), 25-75.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *CCEO*, canon 563, §1.

inside; this is an important characteristic. The members do not distance themselves from the world; quite the contrary, they work from within<sup>22</sup>; some individually (penetration of secular institutes) and others in common (collaboration with secular institutes)<sup>23</sup>. Secularity, understood in the context of canon 710 as the unique state of living a full religious consecration while remaining fully immersed in ordinary secular society rather than a cloistered community, is the preferred field of secular institutes. Consecration and secularity are in symbiosis in secular institutes; a continuous synthesis that is to be made<sup>24</sup>. No dimension is to be neglected<sup>25</sup> whatever might be the inherent tensions<sup>26</sup>. The norms common to institutes of consecrated life (canons 573-606) apply here in the same way as the norms specific to consecrated secularity (canons 710-730).

By their consecration, lay people and clergy become part of the secular institute. However, their canonical status does not change within the people of God; they do not become religious even as they are consecrated. By assuming the evangelical counsels through sacred bonds (and not through public vows), members work to imbue all things with the spirit of the Gospel through apostolic activities. While lay members accomplish this by their participation in the evangelizing work of the Church, by the witness of a Christian life and by fidelity to their consecration or by helping to align world realities with God's plan, clerical members achieve this by the witness of their consecrated life within the presbyterium and by the sanctifying office of their sacred ministry<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> See *VC*, n° 10.

<sup>23</sup> Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, *The Secular Institutes*, 29-30. See also canon 714.

<sup>24</sup> CICLSAL, *Consecration and Secularity*, 8.

<sup>25</sup> CICLSAL, *Consecration and Secularity*, 9.

<sup>26</sup> CICLSAL, *Consecration and Secularity*, 19-20.

<sup>27</sup> Canon 713, §§1-3.

### Other Forms of Consecration

Beyond hermits, members of religious institutes, and secular institutes, the Church recognizes other forms of life composed of both women and men. These are the Order of Virgins (canon 604) and the Society of Apostolic Life (canons 731-746). While approaching/approximating (*accedunt*<sup>28</sup>) the consecrated life, these two typologies do not necessarily require a profession of the evangelical counsels and are therefore not essentially a religious consecration in the strict sense in the Church. However, they lead a life in the spirit of the evangelical counsels<sup>29</sup>.

### Order of Virgins

Consecrated virginity was lived by both women and men in the Church. A solemn rite of this consecration was provided for in the Roman Pontifical. However, in 1927, the Sacred Congregation of Religious refused to allow diocesan bishops to consecrate non-religious women<sup>30</sup>. Thus, over time, only certain female contemplative religious institutes used this ancient rite on the occasion of their religious professions.

Although with the Apostolic Constitution *Sponsa Christi*<sup>31</sup>, Pius XII had reserved this rite of consecration of virgins to religious women, certain diocesan bishops and Benedictine abbots in the

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<sup>28</sup> There is still debate about the meaning of this verb, not only canonically but also practically and theologically. For the Order of Virgins, there is indeed a promise/vow of chastity, obedience to the bishop, and poverty according to the rule of life approved by the bishop. For the Societies of Apostolic Life, it would be necessary to see the proper law of each society.

<sup>29</sup> Rose M. McDermott, "Commentaries of Canons 573-746," in John P. Beal, James A. Coriden, and Thomas J. Green (eds.), *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, commissioned by Canon Law Society of America (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2000), 769.

<sup>30</sup> *Canon Law Digest (CLD)* 1, 266.

<sup>31</sup> Pius XII, Apostolic constitution *Sponsa Christi*, November 21, 1950, *CLD* 3, 234.

United States of America had the faculty to consecrate Benedictine nuns as virgins with simple perpetual vows<sup>32</sup>. Since the Second Vatican Council and with the revision of this rite as requested by *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, diocesan bishops can also consecrate non-religious women as virgins<sup>33</sup> in accordance with ritual norms<sup>34</sup>.

Virgins propose to follow Christ more closely, mystically espouse Christ, and place themselves at the service of the Church. It is the diocesan bishop who consecrates them to God through the sacred words (*sanctum propositum*<sup>35</sup>) that these virgins express. Virgins may join together at the diocesan or national level to ensure faithful observance of their sacred words and to place themselves effectively at the service of the Church (canon 604, §§2-3).

### **Societies of Apostolic Life**

The various societies of apostolic life take their place alongside the ICL. Their members, without taking religious vows, pursue the apostolate entrusted to them by the Church as defined in the constitutions of each society. They lead a fraternal life together,

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<sup>32</sup> CLD 4, 166-68. See also *Sponsa Christi*, art. III.3, which formed the basis for the extension of the faculty enjoyed by diocesan bishops and Benedictine abbots. Cf. McDermott, "Commentaries of Canons 573-746," see footnote n° 259, 768.

<sup>33</sup> Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, December 14, 1963, *AAS* 56 (1964): 97-134, n° 80. See also, Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, Decree, A New Rite of Consecration of Virgins is Promulgated, May 31, 1970, *AAS* 62 (1970): 650; *CLD* 7, 421-25.

<sup>34</sup> *Ordo Consecrationis Virginum*, 1978, n° 3-5.

<sup>35</sup> As mentioned above, there is also the canonical discussion on this famous *propositum* and its translation.

just like religious institutes<sup>36</sup>, and strive for the perfection of charity according to their way of life.

Without publicly professing the evangelical counsels (a fundamental element of consecration), some societies in this category assume these evangelical counsels. Thus, their members commit to a certain sacred bond defined in the constitutions<sup>37</sup>. There is thus a kind of assimilation, without identification, with the ICL<sup>38</sup>, which allows, for example, the superiors of clerical societies of apostolic life of pontifical right to enjoy a power of government *ad instar religiosorum* (canon 596, §2).

### **New Forms of Consecrated Life**

Canon 605 deals with new forms of consecrated life that might emerge and that are not already classified under the various gifts of consecrated life recognized in the *CIC*. In short, these are not new institutes of consecrated life, rather new forms of consecrated life. Diocesan bishops are competent to discern the

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<sup>36</sup> This justifies and necessitates the norms of canons 733, 740 and 745. Cf. *CCEO*, canons 554-562.

<sup>37</sup> We note that these sacred bonds are not impediments for marriage as stipulated in canon 1088; they are not public perpetual vows professed in a religious institute. See also Tomás Rincón, “Commentaries of Canons 573-746,” in *CDCBA*, 553.

<sup>38</sup> This explains the frequent references to the norms on Religious Institutes or Institutes of Consecrated Life in general.

former *ad normam iuris*<sup>39</sup>, while the Apostolic See has jurisdiction over the latter<sup>40</sup>.

It can be said that canon 605 is, to a certain extent, forward-looking. It demonstrates the Church's openness and readiness to discern God's calls. The norms of canons 573-606 and other legislations are safeguards for the diocesan bishops for the valid exercise of their competence.

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<sup>39</sup> Canon 579. See also Francis, Apostolic Letter Issued Motu Proprio Amending Canon 579 of the Code of Canon Law *Authenticum charismatis*, vatican.va, November 1, 2020, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu\\_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20201101\\_authenticum-charismatis.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20201101_authenticum-charismatis.html) (Accessed July 27, 2026); *VC*, n° 62 which establishes some criteria of application of canon 605; Congregation of Bishops, Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops *Apostolorum successores*, February 22, 2004 (*AS*), *Enchiridion Vaticanum* 22 (*EV*) (2003-2004): cols. 1567-2159, n° 107 which presents the criteria for discernment of new charisms by the diocesan bishop; CICLSAL, *Rescriptum ex-Audientia SS.MI*, Rescript on public associations of faithful *in itinere*, vatican.va, June 15, 2022, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2022/06/15/220615e.html> (Accessed July 27, 2026); Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Relationships between Hierarchical and Charismatic Gifts for the Life and Mission of the Church *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, press.vatican.va, May 15, 2016, n° 18, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20160516\\_iuvenescit-ecclesia\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20160516_iuvenescit-ecclesia_en.html) (Accessed July 27, 2026).

<sup>40</sup> George Chidi Iheanacho, *L'Église catholique au Nord-Cameroun et les Missionnaires oblats : autonomie juridique et dialectique intra-ecclésiale (1946-2026)* (Paris : L'Harmattan, 2026), footnote 114, 157. See also Benoît Malvaux, « Vers de nouvelles formes de vie consacrée, » *Revue de droit canonique* 67 (2017): 468-70; Susane U. Ngueme, « La vie fraternelle: un défi permanent. L'exemple du Cameroun, » *Vies consacrées* 2 (2018): 17.

### Third Orders and Associations of the Faithful

Since time immemorial, the faithful have drawn closer to and identified with great religious orders<sup>41</sup>. This trend has often been motivated by the quest for a better spiritual life and an engaged Christian life in society; it “... is based, by virtue of Baptism and Confirmation, on the general obligations and rights of the faithful to participate in the apostolate in the Church (canon 225)”<sup>42</sup> and to experience the communion and cooperation inherent in the life of the Church.<sup>43</sup>

Even today, the same phenomena continue through private and public associations of the faithful that gather around ICL and SAL or that exist independently. These associations have been considered as “charismatic family,”<sup>44</sup> the larger family of a particular institute or society, or those associated with ICL or SAL. As Pope Francis emphasizes, “[i]ndeed, around each religious family, every Society of Apostolic Life and every Secular Institute, there is a larger family, a ‘charismatic family’, which includes a number of Institutes which identify with the same charism, and especially lay faithful who feel called, precisely as lay persons, to share in the same charismatic

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<sup>41</sup> VC, n° 54. See also L. Boisvert, *Laïcs associés à un institut religieux* (Montréal: Éditions Bellarmin, 2001), 7-8.

<sup>42</sup> Iheanacho, *L'Église catholique au Nord-Cameroun et les Missionnaires oblats*, 108.

<sup>43</sup> Rose M. McDermott, “Associates and Associations Joined to Religious Institutes,” *Canon Law Society of America Proceedings (CLSAP)* 60 (1998): 132.

<sup>44</sup> Francis, Apostolic Letter on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life *Scrivo a voi*, vatican.va, November 21, 2014, III, n° 1, EV 30 (2014): col. 1847, English version, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_letters/documents/papa-francesco\\_lettera-ap\\_20141121\\_lettera-consacra.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_lettera-ap_20141121_lettera-consacra.html) (Accessed July 27, 2026).

reality”<sup>45</sup> To all these categories, we should add ecclesial movements and new communities, these post-conciliar ecclesial realities, but which remain consequences of this great *aggiornamento* of the Church<sup>46</sup>. In short, we are in a new field that is constantly evolving in the Church. However, this paper is focused on the lay faithful associated with ICL and SAL.

### **Brief History of Third Orders: From the 13<sup>th</sup> Century to the 1917 Code**

The lay faithful had often been attracted by the lifestyle of monks and nuns. However, it was from the 13th century that some lay people felt a Christian duty to correct, through the examples of their lives, the failings manifested in the lives of monks and nuns. Therefore, they sought to reform Christian societies, especially through the preaching of good morals, but authorization was not granted. Repeated refusals from the Apostolic See ceased when Alexander III (1159-1181) granted this faculty to preach<sup>47</sup>.

Unfortunately, without proper training, lay preachers easily fell into heresies; Lucius III was forced to ban them. In 1207, Innocent III (1198-1216) reinstated them on the condition that they refrain from preaching on doctrinal issues. Eventually, some

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<sup>45</sup> Francis, Apostolic Letter on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life *Scrivo a voi*. III, n° 1, *EV* 30 (2014): col. 1847.

<sup>46</sup> John Paul II, “Homily on the Solemnity of Pentecost”, vatican.va, May 31, 1998, 2, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1998/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_31051998.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_31051998.html) (Accessed July 27, 2026).

<sup>47</sup> Jarrett Bede, Heckmann Ferdinand, Zimmerman Benedict, Oliger Livarius, Jouve Odoric, Hess Lawrence and John Doyle, “Third Orders.” *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, Robert Appleton Company, 1912). <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14637b.htm> (Accessed July 27, 2026). See also Clarence Perkins, “The Knight Templars in the British Isles”, *English Historical Review*, n° XCVIII-April, (1910): 227, <https://archive.org/details/englishhistorica25londuoft/page/226/mode/2up> (Accessed July 27, 2026).

of these lay people would become priests or join religious orders, and others would remain lay faithful while maintaining spiritual ties with the group of colleagues who had become priests or religious. It was thus in the 13th century that these groups of lay faithful living in the world but spiritually associated with clerics and religious were identified as third orders<sup>48</sup>.

Without delving into the intricacies of the nomenclature of third orders, it should be noted that this group is divided into two categories: regulars and seculars. The former can live in convents, profess private vows, wear distinctive habits, and the latter live in the world, can be married or not, lay or clerical, and make a solemn promise<sup>49</sup>. These third orders as groups of lay people united in prayer, were popular, for example, in France and Quebec between the end of the 19th century and the mid-20th century. The *CIC/17* recognized the secular third orders in c. 703 in connection with the religious orders endowed with an apostolic privilege, while the *ius vigen*s, without mentioning religious orders, categorizes them in the general nomenclature of the associations of the faithful (canon 303)<sup>50</sup>.

### Third Orders and Associations in the 1983 Code

While the *CIC/17* classified associations into secular third orders, confraternities, and pious unions (canon 700), the *CIC* classifies third orders in the general regime of associations linked to religious institutes (canon 303). Associations are also distinguished according to their relationship to the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Thus, there are public associations of the faithful (canon 301, §3) and private associations of the faithful (canon

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<sup>48</sup> Jarrett, et al. "Third Order."

<sup>49</sup> Leo XIII, Apostolic Constitution *Misericors Dei Filius*, May 30, 1883, *Acta Sanctae Sedis* 15 (1898): 513-20. See also Sacred Congregation on Indulgences, January 13, 1893; Jarrett, et al. "Third Orders."

<sup>50</sup> *VC*, n° 54 highlights in the same vein new third orders that Religious Institutes may want to promote today.

299, §§1-2). They can also be composed solely of lay people (canons 327-329), solely of clergy (canon 302), or be common to both lay faithful and clergy (canon 298, §1).

That being said, the faithful, individually or in groups, have the freedom to found and direct associations that aim at charity, piety or the promotion of Christian vocations (canons 215 and 298, §1). Two rights emerge here: the right of association and the right of assembly. These rights constitute a freedom that encompasses both the discretion to establish and/or to join associations. They are reinforced by the Christian duty imposed by baptism and confirmation (canon 225, §1) with regard to the apostolate of the Church<sup>51</sup> and the impregnation of the temporal order with the evangelical spirit<sup>52</sup>. In short, the sanctification of the temporal order is a specificity of the lay faithful<sup>53</sup>.

Although the freedom granted or recognized by canonical norms to the faithful extends to both the promotion and support of apostolic activities, it nevertheless admits of limits<sup>54</sup>:

- a) This right is to be exercised according to the competence of each member of the faithful in light of their circumstances and state as faithful.
- b) Only the competent ecclesiastical authority may authorize an association or enterprise of the faithful to claim the name “Catholic” (canons 216, 300, and 803).

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<sup>51</sup> Proclamation of the Gospel in all its ramifications.

<sup>52</sup> Canon 225, §2: Conducting secular business and exercising secular functions.

<sup>53</sup> *LG*, n° 31.

<sup>54</sup> Not all rights are limited by the common good: the choice of a way of life, judicial protection of rights, the right to a good reputation, and the right to religious freedom (limited by public order, which can, to a certain extent, be considered a common good).

- c) The common good of the Church always takes precedence over the rights of any individual member of the faithful (canon 223, §1).
- d) The rights of others and the duty of each person toward others, whether a faithful or not.
- f) The duty of the competent ecclesiastical authority to regulate the exercise of the rights proper to the faithful in view of the common good (canon 223, §2)<sup>55</sup>.

It must be emphasized that the baptismal duty of the faithful is more a moral obligation than a legal duty. Indeed, from a legal point of view, the apostolate of the faithful is an object of a right of freedom which, in its actual exercise, can neither be imposed nor impeded. This right is a matter of the free choice of the faithful; it therefore necessarily calls for the vigilance of the competent ecclesiastical authority to ensure that the witnesses of life are consistent with Christian values and that the apostolate is devoid of any proselytism<sup>56</sup>.

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<sup>55</sup> Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts, *Nota explicative*, December 8, 2010, in *Communicationes* 42 (2010): 280-281. The commission notes that canon 223, §2 recognizes the authority of the competent ecclesiastical authority to regulate, through general provisions, the exercise of the faithful's rights in order to respect the requirements of the common good. Here, common good is understood in the sense of *Dignitatis humanae*, no. 6: the social situation that helps people to develop their own qualities fully and easily, and the protection of the rights and duties of the human person. See also Second Vatican Council, Declaration on Religious Liberty *Dignitas humanae*, December 7, 1965, *AAS* 58 (1966): 929-46; *AS*, n° 63, *EV* 22 (2003-2004): cols. 1699-1703 and Iheanacho, *L'Église catholique au Nord-Cameroun et les Missionnaires oblats*, 246.

<sup>56</sup> Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People *Apostolicam actuositatem* (*AA*), n° 24, vatican.va, November 18, 1965, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651118\\_apostolicam-actuositatem\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_en.html) (Accessed July 27, 2026). See also Benedict XVI, Post-synodal Exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis*, n° 85, vatican.va, February 22, 2007,

### Special Norms for Lay Associations

The *CIC* emphasizes some points regarding lay associations. Associations must have spiritual purposes and aim at uniting faith and life in the animation of the temporal order through Christian-inspired values (canons 298 and 327). This is a form of lay participation in the Church's apostolate.

Therefore, associations of the lay faithful have to cooperate with each other in view of supporting the apostolate in a given territory (canon 328). In fact, communion within the Church is a priority and is to be promoted at all times (canon 209). The specificity of the lay apostolate requires the actors to be competent and well prepared to face the challenges of their association and be faithful to their lay vocation (canon 329)<sup>57</sup>. Being a lay faithful is not an excuse to ignore the realities of the life and teachings of the Church. This awareness is in keeping with being a Christian.

### Criteria of Ecclesiality<sup>58</sup>

Some principles of ecclesiality are borne in mind in establishing, assessing and collaborating with associations of Christ's faithful.

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[https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_exh\\_20070222\\_sacramentum-caritatis.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20070222_sacramentum-caritatis.html) (Accessed July 27, 2026). Id., Homily at Esplanade of the Sanctuary of Aparecida, §6, vatican.va, May 13, 2007, [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2007/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20070513\\_conference-brazil.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20070513_conference-brazil.html) (Accessed July 27, 2026). Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, n° 14, vatican.va, November 24, 2013, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html) (Accessed July 27, 2026).

<sup>57</sup> *AA*, n° 28-32.

<sup>58</sup> Ecclesiality as the quality or character of being truly part of the Church, allowing for faith, prayer, and actions to be always connected to the whole community of believers. It involves living, thinking, and believing in visible communion with the teachings and authority of the Magisterium.

These help the promoters of associations and support the ecclesiastical authority when partnering with associations. These principles are considered in the light of communion with and mission of the Church and the Apostolic exhortation *Christifideles laici*<sup>59</sup> is a reference point.

The first criterion is the universal call to holiness as a supreme vocation of each Christian. This is accessed by the sacrament of baptism and sustained by the other sacraments and Christian practices. The second is the readiness to profess and uphold the Catholic faith by standing for the truth about Christ, his Church and about man in line with the teaching of the Church. This is witnessing to one's faith. The third principle of ecclesiality is the urgency to be and remain in communion with the pope and the bishops (canon 209) and in striving to mutually collaborate with other Church associations. This is a recognition of our unity of purpose in the Church. The fourth evokes the alignment with apostolic work and vision of the Church summed up in the evangelization and sanctification of the world (canons 215, 298, §1). Finally, the fifth is the availability and readiness to be present and active in the transformation of the society in the light of Christian values, especially the associations of lay faithful whose primary focus is secular reality<sup>60</sup>.

### **Collaboration of Associations with Religious Institutes**

Certain principles will serve as beacons to guide the required collaboration of associations with ICL/SAL. They are based on three dimensions of the life of Christ's faithful.

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<sup>59</sup> John Paul II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World *Christifideles laici*, December 30, 1988, *AAS* 81 (1989): 393-521.

<sup>60</sup> John Paul II, *Christifideles laici*, n° 30. See also *LG*, n° 31 and Lluís Martínez Sistach, *Associations of Christ's Faithful* (Montréal: Wilson & Lafleur, 2008), 27-28.

### **Three Framework Principles: Baptism, Mission, and Cooperation.**

**Baptism:** Canon 208 affirms that through baptism, all the faithful have true equality of dignity and activity in cooperating for the growth of the Church, according to the functions and conditions of each member. No one dignity or apostolic activity is more honorable than the other; the canonical status and conditions of the faithful may vary, but this does not diminish the dignity of each member of the faithful or their work within the Church.

**Mission:** Canon 211 guarantees the right and duty of every faithful to work for the spread of the divine message. In a particular way, lay people, with the required training and expertise, have this right and duty with regard to teaching and defending Church doctrine. They could be advisors/experts according to their expertise and hold ecclesiastical offices according to the law (canons 228; 229).

**Cooperation:** Canon 311 provides that associations related to the ICL working in a particular church are subject to the pastoral directives of the local Ordinary, are to cooperate with other associations in the apostolate, and contribute to the promotion of existing apostolic works. The Church is to be seen as united in its apostolate in particular churches; ICL and associations are to contribute to this.

### **Initial Intention and Purpose of the Associations**

The associations of lay faithful connected with the ICL/SAL do not pursue goals other than those in keeping with canon 298, §1; they are directed toward the supernatural mission of the Church. This was the case at the inception of the Third Orders; it remains the same today with lay associations.

Institutes of Consecrated Life that benefit from the existence of lay associations linked to their charisms and missions have

everything to gain by accompanying and assisting these associations in fulfilling their lay vocations. Indeed, since members of ICL and their lay associates are already imbued with the spirit of the founding charism and the charism of the founders and given that this is a spiritual asset and source of inspiration, collaboration, and cooperation, succession in apostolic works by the lay associations would be self-evident in today's contexts.

### **Importance of Statutes for Associations of the Lay Faithful**

Canon 304, §1 requires the existence of statutes for each association, whether private or public. It establishes the role of statutes. It also determines key elements of statutes: the purpose or corporate object pursued, the headquarters, the government, and the conditions required to be part of the association.

Statutes are indispensable in determining the modes of action of each association, including its relations with ecclesiastical and civil authorities, and with other associations. In short, statutes are like the keystone for deciphering the purpose of associations. Together with the *CIC* and other internal rules of associations, statutes guarantee transparency in management and allow higher authorities to exercise oversight roles (c. 305). Associations of lay faithful that are linked to ICL/SAL and maintain appropriate statutes, facilitate viable and efficient relationship with ecclesiastical authorities. Such provision helps guarantee the integrity of faith and morals, allows for effective vigilance against the spread of abuses within the structures and activities of these associations in the Church (canon 305, §1)<sup>61</sup>.

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<sup>61</sup> Miguel Delgado Galindo, *Charismes, mouvements ecclésiaux et associations de fidèles* (Montréal: Wilson & Lafleur, 2014), 83-100, especially, 92. See also Martínez Sistach, *Associations of Christ's Faithful*, 21, 73-77.

### **Management of the Works of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life**

An increasingly secularized society and a Church with a synodal dimension are recipes for better succession quality of lay faithful associated with ICL/ SAL in the works of the apostolate formerly established and managed by religious men and women.

### **Management in a More Secularized Society**

The secular sphere is the specific area of lay people in pursuing the mission of the Church and in fulfilling the objectives of the associations of lay faithful. This recognition is more valuable in a context of increased secularization, affecting aspects of society long under the leadership and influence of Church values. Instead of a resigned attitude, the Church and its entities would have to learn to identify new approaches so that Christian values may always have a place in the activities of the men and women of our world today.

One way to respond to the challenges of unbridled secularization is to be a Church of our time; a Church in which the lay faithful, whose distinctive competence is the secular realities, occupy their proper position: to imbue the temporal order with the spirit of the Gospel. It is the responsibility of the lay faithful to be the image and the active presence of the Church where post-modern secularism does not allow religious and ecclesiastical symbolism to play visible roles. Canon 225, §1 already indicated this when it states that: “[...] this obligation is even more pressing when it is only through them [the laity] that men can hear the Gospel and know Christ.” With competent and well-formed lay faithful, the Church and its entities will remain present and effective in contemporary society.

As they prefigure the world to come, ICL can set an example in this area. Like yeast hidden in the dough, ICL will have to identify different ways of collaborating with the lay faithful,

beginning with those affiliated with them. The *CIC* already invites the competent authorities of the Church to ensure that the lay faithful play these roles and occupy the necessary positions in a secularized society (canon 225, §1). Several examples can be cited: Canadian Religious Stewardship (CRS/SRC), which provides planning, human resource management, communications, operations, finance, and legal/governance services to ICL/SAL<sup>62</sup>. There are also lay experts and consultants in management and leadership positions within particular churches, ICL/SAL, and entities related to the Church structure.

This situation applies not only to the particular churches of the Northern Hemisphere, but also to those of the global South, for the Church remains a communicating vessel. This context is reinforced by the interconnectedness of today's society and by the reality of the global village or “our common home,” as Pope Francis calls it<sup>63</sup>.

### **Management in a Synodal Church**

In the spirit of a synodal Church, ICL/SAL, even particular churches, could be encouraged to take up the opportunity offered to integrate into the management and operation of their apostolic works the lay faithful who were former members of these ICL/SAL or who did not complete the formative path provided in the major seminaries or houses of formation. These lay faithful received the same training as their colleagues who became clergy or perpetually professed within the Church. Furthermore, some

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<sup>62</sup> Canadian Religious Stewardship, “Our Services”, [crs-src.org, https://www.crs-src.org/services/](https://www.crs-src.org/services/) (Accessed July 27, 2026). See also Iheanacho, *L'Église catholique au Nord-Cameroun et les Missionnaires oblats*, 144-145 for further examples.

<sup>63</sup> Francis, Encyclical Letter on the Care for our Common Home *Laudato si'*, n° 1, [vatican.va](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html), May 24, 2015, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html) (Accessed July 27, 2026).

were able to acquire complementary skills, capable of providing great services. Although sometimes there could be apprehensions and prejudices against them, it remains true that these lay faithful have a great contribution to make to the advancement of evangelical values within the human society, through the management of apostolic works and related collaborations, especially if these persons remained faithful to the Church. The examples of the Diocese of Nsukka in Nigeria<sup>64</sup> and some ICL are apt here<sup>65</sup>. What is proposed above is also applicable, *mutatis mutandis* to deacons and priests who have lost the clerical state.

Furthermore, the integration of former seminarians and religious men and women in the management and promotion of Church apostolate would be a good way to affirm that discontinuing from a major seminary or an ICL/SAL is not a condemnation of any kind; rather, it would confirm, as it is often said, “once a seminarian, always a seminarian.” This approach will contribute to the healing process for some of these former colleagues who feel unjustly dismissed from the houses of formation and who may still bear these wounds today, sometimes transformed into antipathy against the Church and its institutions.

In this same synodal spirit, associations of the lay faithful can aggregate, in the manner of ICL/SAL at their accomplishment (canon 580), for better collaboration in the succession and takeover of the apostolate of ICL/SAL. What then can be said of the ICL-affiliated associations that coordinate and manage the structures and organs of fundraising and project financing of these ICL?<sup>66</sup> And the lay faithful who offer their services freely

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<sup>64</sup> The convocation of and interaction with former seminarians.

<sup>65</sup> There is an active involvement of laypeople who serve as advisors on provincial councils, financial administration, etc. in the Oblate Provinces in Canada and Québec.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. The Missionary Associates of Mary Immaculate, *Centre Missionnaires Oblats*, etc. who collaborate with the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Canada and elsewhere.

and voluntarily to collaborate with the ICL in specific projects? These are all examples of cooperation and collaboration between the ICL/SAL and other members of *Christifideles*.

One could also raise a call to cultivate a more Catholic understanding of the Roman Catholic Church. The apostolic works of ICL/SAL are not simply their own works (canon 1256); they are the apostolate of the Catholic Church and therefore, their temporal goods are ecclesiastical properties (canons 635 and 1257). It is not forbidden - indeed it is desirable - to transfer or entrust these works to particular churches or to other ICL/SAL present in the territory<sup>67</sup>.

### **Some Inevitable Challenges**

Whatever one might say about the collaboration between the ICL and other lay faithful, one should not feign ignorance of some underlying challenges. A major challenge will be the loss of historical memory surrounding the apostolic works of the ICL/SAL. Several years after the retirement of the last religious and lay faithful associated with an ICL that promoted an apostolate, it would not be incongruous to realize that other lay faithful who succeed the ICL/SAL might not always act as those who had known and imbibed the charism of these founding or sponsoring ICL/SAL.

The loss of historical memory is often due to the changing values and benchmarks of those responsible for the apostolic works of the ICL/SAL. These persons sometimes followed different educational paths compared to those who were present at the establishment of the apostolate. These persons live and work in new and different societies and are subject to other influences

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<sup>67</sup> We developed this perspective in a french article published in *Studia canonica* 59 (2025): 63-94: “Les instituts religieux et les églises particulières face aux œuvres d’apostolat: concurrence déloyale ou culture de relation ecclésiale? ». doi : 10.2143/STC.59.1.3294721.