

Synodality, the Exercise of Authority, and Decision-making Processes: Who gets to Make the Decisions?

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Abstract

A religious superior is one who through appointment or election assumed the responsibility of being God's representative to guide other members of the institute in their commitment to seek out and do the will of God. Hence, leadership or exercise of authority in a religious institute is a spiritual reality with social connotation. Ecclesiastical offices are established in stable manner for spiritual purposes (cf. can.145, 1). Exercise of authority within the religious domain is not a question of wielding power over other members but service, empowering others for a maximum utilization of their potentials and talents for their personal fulfil, and for the attainment of the goal of the institute for the glory of God. With the second Vatican Council, there is newness in the mode of exercise of authority and decision making in religious institute. This write up is an attempt to expatiate the novum in exercise of authority and process of decision making from the perspective of canonical legislation and in the light of the principles of the Synod on Synodality. Pope Francis initiated the Synod on Synodality in October 10, 2021 to end in October 23, 2023. With this Synod he is calling the Church to rediscover its deeply synodal nature. "This rediscovery of the synodal roots of the Church will involve a process of humbly learning together how God is calling us to be as the

Church in the third millennium.” (Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality 2022). Exercise of authority also is to be done in a synodal way without however cancelling the role of religious superiors as guide of their brothers and sisters in seeking for and doing the will of God and achieving the purpose of their profession of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience which is the perfection of charity or union with God (cf. can. 573).

Introduction

Religious life is a life of total dedication and commitment to the service of God, which constitutes a special consecration that is deeply rooted in baptismal consecration and expresses it more fully (cf. *Perfectae Caritatis* 5a). It entails practice of evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience in imitation of Christ who was poor, chaste (cf. Mt 8: 20; Lk 9: 58), and who redeemed and sanctified men through obedience even to the death on the cross (cf. Phil 2: 8). Religious men and women, “driven by love with which the Holy Spirit floods their hearts (cf. Rm 5:5) they live more and more for Christ and for his body which is the Church (cf. Col. 1: 24). The more fervently, then, they are joined to Christ by this total lifelong gift of themselves, the richer the life of the Church becomes and the more lively and successful its apostolate” (*Perfectae Caritatis* 1c).

The “ultimate norm of the religious life is the following of Christ set forth in the Gospels” (*Perfectae Caritatis* 2a). Hence, the essence of religious life lies in living the life of Christ of total self-emptying (cf. Phil 2: 7), life in the Spirit (cf. Rom 8: 1-13), listening to his words (cf. Lk 10: 39) and being solicitous for the things of Christ (cf. *Perfectae Caritatis* 5c).

Exercise of authority in religious institute is at the service of the religious life of the members and the mission of the institute to see to its

fulfillment; and to care for the integral goods of the members called to the mission. How is one conferred with authority expected to carry out this duty in this third millennium? In this write up we set out to expound the new modality of exercise of authority and process of decision making in a synodal way as established in the 1983 Code of Canon Law. But first of all, we shall begin by delineating briefly the root of the office or function of religious superior.

Brief Survey of the Origin of the Office of a Superior and Function

Every ecclesiastical office has duties attached to it for which it is created and not for the exaltation of the office holder. The exercise of authority in religious life by a religious superior involves carrying out the teaching, sanctifying and governing functions. The function of a religious superior originated from the time of early monasticism from the role of the abbot.

The term abbot came from the Hebrew word *abba*, which means father. This word was used in the early 4th century to describe the role of some of the Egyptian hermits as guides and teachers of religious life for younger monks who came to live under their direction. The original ideal of the abbot's spiritual fatherhood of his monks developed ultimately into the juridical office of abbot, vested with authority as set forth in the Benedictine Rule. (P. VOLKY 2003).

In the monastic institution, the figure and function of abbot is of fundamental importance and it was a common conception that monastic community cannot exist without the abbot. He is seen as the foundation on which the monastic edifice is built (cf. T. LECCISOTTI 1978). He is the principle of unity and mediator of *koinonia*. The primary and fundamental function of the abbot is centered on spiritual direction, a function for which he has to render account to God. As the father of the community and for each single monk, the abbot also takes

care of the entire spiritual and material needs of the community and each individual monk.

The current canonical legislation does not explicitly attribute to a religious superior the obligation of spiritual direction for the members. Nevertheless, the series of obligations attached to the office of superior in the code point to superior as spiritual guide and animator. The legislator encourages the members to approach their superiors with trust and confidence and to open their minds freely and spontaneously to them (cf. can. 630, 5).

The office of a religious superior as an ecclesiastical office is created for the teaching, sanctifying and governing functions laid down in different parts of the 1983 code. Religious Superior are given authority for them to carry out the functions attached to the office. This authority is not to be exercised arbitrarily but according to the prescriptions of the universal and proper law (can. 617) in a synodal way.

The word Synod is from Greek word *Syn-hodos* which means the same way or the same path. A Synodal Church is a Church that walks the same way or the same path listening to one another and to what the Holy Spirit is telling her. The Church of the third millennium treads the path of synodality, and it is hoped that through this path, the Church will be renewed and reconstructed to its original model envisaged by Christ and in the model of early Church (GEEVARGHESE KAITHAVANA 2021). Pope Francis believes God wants the Church to walk the path of synodality in this third millennium (Vademecum 1.2).

The New Way of Exercising Authority in Religious Institute

In the past with much emphasis on “blind obedience”, there was less involvement or engagement of the members in dialogue before final

decision is made. Dialogue was not all that part of authority obedience relationship. (cf. L. J. SUENENS 1968). The Mother Church taking cognizance of the changed circumstances of time in which religious life is lived today, in her wisdom prescribed new modality of exercising authority which when followed may help to eliminate the conflict being experienced at times between the person in authority and the governed.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council in *Perfectae Caritatis* no 14, laid down new method of governance in religious institutes that is more dialogical, emphasizing the application of the principle of subsidiarity and co – responsibility. The doctrine of Vatican II on religious governance is expressed in juridical form in the current 1983 code of canon law as follow:

The authority which Superiors receive from God through the ministry of the Church is to be exercised by them in a spirit of service. In fulfilling their office, they are to be docile to the will of God, and are to govern those subject to them as children of God. By their reverence for the human person, they are to promote voluntary obedience. They are to listen willingly to their subjects and foster their cooperation for the good of the institute and the Church, without prejudice however to their authority to decide and to command what is to be done. (can. 618).

When the legislator talks about the superior promoting the voluntary obedience of the members and listening willingly to their subjects and to foster their cooperation for the good of the Church and institute, he is referring to the need for the superior to engage the members in a fraternal dialogue before arriving at final decision in order to hear the opinion of the members. It is only when the superior enters into dialogue with the members that she will be able to know their feelings and thoughts on a given matter and that will help too in the search for the will of God and for her to make right decision. Members are to be

engaged in dialogue because they are free human persons with intellect and will endowed with different gifts of grace and nature with which they can impact positively on the life of the institute.

Before the Second Vatican Council, there was no juridical obligation of dialogue with the members before the superior gives order on what is to be done. Canonical legislation requires that one exercising authority carry the members of the institute along by involving them in the decision making and not just to give order without first trying to know the mind and feelings of the members of the institute through dialogue for communal discernment of the will of God for the institute and members.

The Significance and Procedure of Dialogue in Decision Making

Dialogue implies interpersonal relationship that comports certain reciprocity as each of the person in dialogue receives and gives and is enriched by this exchange. Hence, it is distinct from controversy, from simple exchange of ideas from any form of inequality in which one part gives and the other receives (cf. C. BROVETTO 1969).

Authentic dialogue requires attentive listening of both persons engaged in dialogue to one another. The service of authority implies the obligation of listening, which is among the principal ministries of superiors, for which they must always be available. Listening comports an unconditional acceptance of the other person, allowing him or her space in one's heart; it requires affection and understanding, appreciation and consideration of the other person's opinion (cf. Congregation for the Institute of Consecrated Life and Society of Apostolic Life (=CICLSAL, *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, 2008, n. 20a).

The Importance of Dialogue/Communal Discernment

Dialogue and communal discernment is of great importance as it helps to promote sense of belonging among members of a religious institutes and respect for the persons who are all concerned in pursuing one goal of seeking and doing the will of God. Both the superior and the members through dialogue try to know and to do the will of God. The Congregation for the Institute of Consecrated Life and Society of Apostolic Life underline this fact thus:

In consecrated life, everyone must sincerely seek the will of the Father, because otherwise the reason itself for the choice of life would disappear; but it is equally important to carry out such a search together with the brothers or the sisters because it is properly that which unites them, “making them a family united to Christ.” Persons in authority are at the service of this search to ensure that it occurs in sincerity and truth...With the intention of doing God's will. (CICLSAL, *Service of Authority* 2008, n. 12).

The need to carry out together with the brothers or the sisters the search for the will of God is indicated in the above passage. Discerning the will of God through dialogue serves as source of unity and make the consecrated persons one family in Christ. The one in authority has the responsibility to ensure that the communal search for the will of God is done in sincerity and truth that is, to ensure an objective search. The essence of community discernment is to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the community through individual prayer and communal reflection to choose together what is right and pleasing to God (Cf. CICLSAL, *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, n. 20e).

A religious institute is a family of spiritual order created by the possession of one common spiritual gift or charism. This serves as the source of the unity and communion of the members. The fact of being a

spiritual family with one mission and one purpose is a premise for communal discernment. The fundamental role of a superior within such a group is to construct together with the members a fraternal community. He or she does this through the service of listening and dialogue, creation of a favourable atmosphere for sharing and co-responsibility, soliciting the participation of everyone in the concern of each one, favouring individual and communitarian dialogue, and promoting harmonious living.

In a communal discernment, the one in authority is to serve as “a focus for the searching and questioning of the community and to be a catalyst sharing questions, expectations, lifting and inspiring. Such a role makes possible the strong docility which must accompany all responsible freedom” (F. B. ROTHUEBBER 1970).

In Community life which is inspired by the Holy Spirit, each individual engages in a fruitful dialogue with the others in order to discover the Father's will. At the same time, community members together recognize in the one who presides an expression of the fatherhood of God and the exercise of authority received from God, at the service of discernment and communion.” (ST. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consacrata* 1994, n. 92).

The importance of authentic dialogue and listening to the other lies in the fact that it affords the superior the opportunity for a better coordination of the spiritual gifts of the members of the community, and opportunity to have a view of the limitations and difficulties of the members when making decisions. Furthermore, listening can help to prevent difficulties on individual and communitarian basis (CICLSAL, Service of Authority and Obedience n. 20 a). A superior engages the community and/or individual in dialogue because each and every member of the institute is differently gifted and can contribute personally to the mission of the institute, and is also a channel through which the will of God can be discovered.

The importance of dialogue cannot be over emphasized as it helps to unite members of the community as one family in Christ and it affords the community opportunity for the members to contribute their gifts for common good. The role of the superior in the communal discernment or dialogue is to see that it is carried out in all honesty and disposition to seek and to do the will of God, which is the essence of religious vocation.

Listening and dialogue is the key to the synodal journey which brings about “greater collaboration, a more profound sense of communion and participation in Church life at various levels” (Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, 2022). The authority attached to the office of superior is for her to foster communion among the members of the institute and their participation in the pursuit for the mission of the institute. She can only achieve this aim by carrying the members along by listening to and engaging them in dialogue.

The entire People of God shares a common dignity and vocation through Baptism. All of us are called by virtue of our Baptism to be active participants in the life of the Church. In parishes, small Christian communities, women and men, young people and the elderly, we are all invited to listen to one another in order to hear the promptings of the Holy Spirit, who comes to guide our human efforts, breathing life and vitality into the Church and leading us into deeper communion for our mission in the world. As the Church embarks on this synodal journey, we must strive to ground ourselves in experiences of authentic listening and discernment on the path of becoming the Church that God calls us to be (Vademecum For the Synod on Synodality 2021).

Conditions for Fruitful Dialogue/Communal Discernment

Fruitful communal discernment requires fulfilment of certain conditions by the Superior. These conditions are: 1) creation of an atmosphere of trust and recognizing the abilities of the members; 2)

listening attentively and encouraging free and sincere dialogue; 3) readiness to accept the possible problems that accompany communal search, and trying to find out the causes of the possible uneasiness and misunderstandings; 4) knowing how to propose solution and being ready to accept others contributions; 5) encouraging and motivating the subjects to use their individual gifts for the community by making their own contributions; and 6) should have the ability to take final decision after evaluating the member's free contributions (cf. CICALSAL, *The Service of Authority and Obedience* n.20 e).

Furthermore, successful communal discernment also demands from the person governing and the governed the determination to seek nothing but divine will, openness to recognize in other members the ability to discover the truth, attention to the signs of the times, “freedom from prejudices, from excessive attachment to one's own ideas, from perceptual frameworks, which are rigid or distorted and from strong oppositions, which frustrate the diversity of opinions,” and firm determination to maintain unity irrespective of what the final decision might be (CICALSAL, *The Service of Authority and Obedience* n.20 e.).

One challenges that might occur despite the effort of the superior to engage the members of the community in a communal discernment is the attitude of closure and unwillingness on the part of some members to share and make their contributions in the communal exchange of ideas for the good of the community or to see moment of dialogue and communal discernment as opportunity to attack the superior or anyone else. Where this is the case, the one in authority should not for this reason withdraws from further dialogue and communal discernment but should exercise patience with such members and keep on praying to God for their change of heart (cf. CICALSAL, *Service of Authority*, n.20C).

Matters for Communal Discernment

One question that needs to be addressed as we talk of the need for dialogue and communal discernment is whether every matter in a religious community actually requires communal discernment and dialogue. The issues that require communal discernment depend on its importance for the life of the community or for the life and work of an individual religious. Nevertheless, the general principle is that superior should consult the members of the community on affairs of community concern.

It is the importance of the question at issue that will determine if it should be subjected to communal discernment or not apart from the cases already specified in the proper law. However, “the spirit of discernment ought to characterize every decision-making process that involves the community. A time of individual prayer and reflection together with a series of important attitudes for choosing together what is right and pleasing to God should never be missing prior to every decision (CICLSAL, *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, n.20 e).

The proper law of every religious institute ought to specify matters that require consultation of members by superiors in their different levels of governance. The more an issue is of great importance to the life of the members the more the necessity to carry them along before decision is made on that. Every affair that concerns the community must be subject to communal discernment in a spirit of prayer to be enlightened by God on what accord with his will in a particular matter. Example of affairs that require dialogue is community time table, menu, and other important activities of the community.

Taking Final Decisions: Whose Responsibility?

After dialogue what happens? Dialogue has three stages: in the first stage the superior presents issues to be deliberated upon, second stage

comprises engagement in dialogue with the members; and the third stage of taking final decision on what is to be done based on what is discovered in dialogue and in personal prayer of the superior. Superior's obligation to dialogue with the members does not imply dialogue in perpetuity (*ad infinitum*). Final conclusion must be reached and directive given on what the community or individual should do, and that is the responsibility of the superior. The labour of seeking together “must end, when it is the moment, with the decision of the superiors whose presence and acceptance are indispensable in every community” (PAUL VI, *Evangelica Testificatio* n. 25).

The Synodal process by which the consultation of the People of God is demanded “does not imply the assumption within the Church of the dynamics of democracy based on the principle of majority” (Vademecum 2021). In religious life too, there is no democratic system of governance and religious superiors have personal executive power which is power of decision to direct the members for the fulfilment of the goal of their religious vocation and the attainment of the goal of the institute. Of course such decision cannot be arbitrarily made as she is to command action to be done in accordance with the constitution and the universal law (cf. can. 617).

Apart from the occasion of general chapter which is a collegial body with highest authority in religious institute (can. 631), whereby final decision is based on the absolute majority votes of the member of the chapter delegates (cf. can. 119, 10), in the case of community, after the process of dialogue and communal discernment, and superior's engagement in personal prayer to hear from God the right thing to do, it is the responsibility of the superior to take final decision and command what is to be done that accords with the will of God.

A good religious' leader should have the courage after listening to the community or to individual religious to command what is to be done without fear or self-interest. The only motive for such decision should

be the good of the individual and the common good of the institute. The demand to dialogue with the members does not remove the obligation of superior to take final decision and see to its implementation. The Council Fathers emphasized this saying: “And so superiors should gladly listen to their subjects and foster harmony among them for the good of the community and the Church, provided that thereby their own authority to decide and command what has to be done is not harmed” (Vatican II, *Perfectae Caritatis* n. 14 d).

The fact that the final decision is the obligation of the Superior and she is to take decision that accord with the will of God is also underlined by the Congregation for the Institute of Consecrated Life thus:

Community discernment is not a substitute for the nature and function of persons in authority, from whom final decision is expected. Nevertheless, persons in authority cannot ignore that the community is the best place in which to recognize and accept the will of God. In any case, discernment is one of the peak moments in a consecrated community where the centrality of God, that ultimate end of everyone's search, as well as the responsibility and the contribution of each one in the journey of all towards the Truth, stand out with particular clarity. (CICLSAL, *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, 20e).

Still on the same idea the Congregation continues: “Despite the obligation of going through the delicate process of communal discernment and listening, the superior is to be firm in demanding the implementation of the decision taken. Authentic love for the community makes the superior able to reconcile firmness, listening to each one and courage to make decisions” (CICLSAL, *The Service of Authority and Obedience* n. 20 f).

Once the superior takes final decision after dialogue, the members are bound to obey and do what is commanded and if anyone has serious

reason not to do what is directed, she is to humbly approach the superior and respectfully let her know her personal problem concerning the order given. If the superior after listening to her insists on her original command, the religious at this juncture, imitating the example of our Lord Jesus Christ who came to do the will of the Father (cf. Jn 4:34; 5: 30; Heb 10: 7; Ps 39: 9), assumed the nature of a slave (Phil 2:7) “learned obedience in the school of suffering” “(Hebrew 5: 8), “under the motion of the Holy Spirit” is to subject herself in faith to the superior “who hold the place of God.” (Vatican II, *Perfectae Caritatis* n. 14 b). Religious imitate Christ in his self-emptying by their exercise of the virtues of humility, obedience, fortitude and chastity (cf. Vatican II, *Perfectae Caritatis* n. 5d).

“The first step of humility is unhesitating obedience, which comes naturally to those who cherish Christ above all. Because of the holy service they have professed, or because of dread of hell and for the glory of everlasting life, they carry out the superior's order as promptly as if the command came from God himself. The Lord says of men like this: No sooner did he hear than he obeyed me (Ps 17/[18]: 45; again, he tells teachers: Whoever listens to you, listens to me (Lk 10: 16). Such people as these immediately put aside their own concerns, abandon their own will, and lay down whatever they have in hand, leaving it unfinished. With the ready step of obedience, they follow the voice of authority in their actions. Almost at the same moment, then, as the master gives the instruction the disciple quickly puts it into practice in fear of God; and both actions together are swiftly completed as one” (THE RULE OF ST. BENEDICT in Latin and English with notes, 1981).

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council underlined the need to obey the directive of the superior when they affirm: “Religious, therefore, in the spirit of faith and love for the divine will should humbly obey their superiors according to their rules and constitutions. Realizing that they

are contributing to building up the body of Christ according to God's plan, they should use both the forces of their intellect and will and the gifts of nature and grace to execute the commands and fulfil the duties entrusted to them. In this way religious obedience, far from lessening the dignity of the human person, by extending the freedom of the sons of God, leads it to maturity” (Vatican II, *Perfectae Caritatis* n. 14 C).

Superiors and subjects form one body, and this body is called to do the will of God. “If a superior makes decision, she should make it in obedience to the will of God; because God wants her to make that decision. If a subject has to carry out an order, she should do so in union with Christ who is obedient to His Father” (Daughters of Divine Love Constitution, Art. 48).

Every human group or organization that gather for a purpose to attain needs order and discipline and someone to lead others towards achievement of the end of the organization. The authority invested on the superior is for her to be able to give directives that accord with the will of God for common good and for the realization of the goal of religious life and mission of the institute. True and authentic dialogue or communal discernment entails ardent search for what is pleasing to God in a given circumstance, divesting oneself of prejudice and attachment to personal interest. The final decision of the superior is not based on what she wants but what God wants or the will of God which is always for our true happiness and salvation.

The Refusal to obey the final decision of the superior “often involves serious loss for the common good.” The superior's final decision must be obeyed by all apart from an order manifestly contrary to the laws of God, or the constitution of the institute, or one involving a serious and certain evil in which case there is no obligation to obey the superior's decision concerning a field in which the calculation of the greater good can vary according to the point of view (PAUL VI., *Evangelica Testificatio* 28).

At profession religious assumed the commitment to do the will of God all the days of their life making total offer of their own will as sacrifice to God to be “united permanently and securely to God's salvific will” (Vatican II, *Perfectae Caritatis* n. 14a). Hence, it is the responsibility of superior and subjects to seek nothing but to know and do the will of God in every circumstance.

To carry out her responsibility as mediator between God and the members effectively, a religious superior is expected to know and love the members for whom she mediates; to have profound experience of God for her to be able to distinguish God's voice from her personal passion or worldly spirit; and to have knowledge of the social and ecclesial reality and command according to rules and constitutions (Cf. P. C. PALMES 2003).

Conclusion

The difficulty witnessed today some times in religious institutes as regards governance could be attributed to exercise of authority that is in some cases less authoritative or on the contrary too authoritative and obedience that is not always responsible or animated by the spirit of faith being contaminated by individualism and secularized mentality of our present time (cf. CICLSAL 2005). Adoption of the new dialogical method in religious governance will go a long way to minimize the conflict which comes up at times between the superiors and subjects. When a superior engages the members in sincere dialogue it will make them feel respected and carried along in affairs that concern them and they will be more disposed to give their voluntary and responsible obedience to the orders or directives of the superior.

As God's representatives and spiritual guides of other members of the institute, superiors are to exercise their authority in the spirit of service

by engaging them in dialogue to seek the will of God before taking final decision that affect their life. This is the new way of exercise of authority demanded by the Mother Church.

The use of dialogue and communal discernment in exercise of authority is of great importance as it helps in promoting voluntary and responsible obedience of the members. When members are involved and carried along in the affairs of the community or the institute, they will more easily identify and be more docile to the decisions made for the common good. Engagement in dialogue with the members shows the respect one in authority has for them as adult and free persons endowed with different gifts and who can contribute for the development of an institute in which they belong. Members of the institute are to be carried along in decision making because every member matters and is also a channel through which the Holy Spirit can speak to the institute.

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