

The Religious Superior and Spiritual Leadership

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1. Relationships with authority in religious communities have not escaped the cultural and social turns of the sixties that have shaken structures of authority in all sectors of society: families, universities, business enterprises, cultural institutions, hospitals, armies, and the Church. Our countries in the West see these years as a crucial period, which defied authority. Already in 1964 Bob Dylan was singing: “Come mothers and fathers throughout the land... Your sons and daughters are beyond your command”. For us religious, this phenomenon was evident, not only in the deliberate changes in the Statutes of our Congregations but also, more importantly, albeit unconsciously, in our mentality, attitude and general behaviour.

2. I think one could say that the real role of the superior in our communities has not only changed but also weakened. If so, is that serious? Many of us will say it is not, and I acknowledge there are good reasons to beware of anything aimed at restoring the role of authority. We still remember experiences of the past. It is noticeable that among some young religious and young priests there is a tendency to favour ideas and practices concerning authority that seem detrimental to human development and indeed contrary to the spirit of Vatican II. Besides, one can say, and not without reason, that true life should come from the grassroots. Jesus, himself, left us these astounding words: “Call nobody your Father on earth: for you have only one Father, He who is in heaven.” (Mt 23:9).

3. It is no less true to say that, if the direct, virile, and dominating styles of authority have been rejected in our modern contemporary culture, many new types of authority are being introduced. While these may prove to be more limited, conditional and particularised, they are nonetheless no less powerful. I am not going to dwell on the fact that psychologists and sociologists insist on bringing back again the role of the father in the family.² A religious community is not a family. But we

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² For example: Alexandre Van der Does de Willebois, *La société sans père*, Paris 1985; David Popenoe, *Life without Father*, New York 1996; David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America*, New York 1996; Matthias Matussek, *Die Vaterlose*

should also think about businesses, hospitals, schools, and universities. Everywhere people realize that new forms of authority must be developed. While it is evident that the direct, formal manner of authority no longer works, they know only too well, that the role of the chief is nevertheless indispensable. He it is who creates the alchemy, and who, instead of simply adding them, multiplies the talents and the skills necessary to realise the goals of the organisation. To accomplish this, he must build up confidence, foster unity, know how to communicate, give example, in a word, give proof of his “leadership”.

4. This interest in the role of leadership does not surprise me. What does astonish me is the little interest given to this role in the majority of efforts proposed for the renewal of religious life.³ A community doesn’t come to be through instant generation. What gives life and makes sense to a group should be identified, encouraged, articulated, questioned, tried, discussed, and finally, decided upon. If the contribution of each member of the community is indispensable in this process, the superior has a particular role to play and, at certain times, his role is decisive. To recognise this role is not only common sense but also a question of faith. According to a long tradition in religious life, there are times when the superior echoes a voice that comes from elsewhere. Many founders, from Benedict to Fr. Colin, like to remember in their rules the word of Jesus: “Whoever listens to you listens to me” (Luke 10:16).⁴

5. That does not mean that we understand this language easily. When speaking of the superior as a spokesman of the Lord, Colin uses a language which is far from the style we use when speaking of leadership in the modern sense of the word. When Benedict and Colin say that subjects who listen to superiors are listening to Christ, they are using symbolic, quasi-sacramental language, which disregards the virtues and the human qualities of the superior. “Let them pay no

Gesellschaft, 1998; Christiane Olivier, *Les fils d’Oreste ou la question du père*, Paris 1999.

³ The Congregation for the Institutes of Religious life and the Societies for Apostolic Life has emphasised the importance of the spiritual authority in religious life. Cf. the document of 1994, *Fraternal Life in Community*, no. 50, and the instruction of 2008, *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, no. 13.

⁴ Cf. Letter of the Superior General, 1st June 2006. Luke 10:16 is cited in numbers 432 and 433 of Colin’s constitutions of 1873.

attention to the person, the virtues or other qualities of the one they obey, but only to our Lord Jesus Christ, for whose sake they obey”.⁵ Besides this *sacramental* type of authority, there are others. The *juridical* type serves to define the legal powers of the superior, for example, the power to delegate. The *organisational* type uses language which highlights his task of organising the resources of the entity which he is serving. Finally, there is a fourth type. We refer to a superior as one who guides, calls, gathers together and challenges the communities and their members to promote the goals of the congregation, namely, the personal growth of its members and the salvation of our neighbour. I call this style ‘*agogical*’, because ‘*agoogos*’ means ‘*guide*’. As I attempt to figure out the idea of leadership, I do not think at first of the sacramental, juridical or organisational types of authority but of this agogical type. It refers to the superior in his role as spiritual guide. The fact that all the important French dictionaries contain the word leadership gives me the excuse of using this word, in French as well as in English, to speak of the spiritual leadership of the superior.

6. At first sight, Colin seems to be unaware of this latter role of the superior. This role demands from the superior, as we have seen, certain qualities and human virtues, which, according to Colin, ought not to play a part in the act of obedience of the religious. However, we must not forget that Colin used the sacramental type when speaking of *obedience* – therefore it has to do with a *subordinate*. On the other hand, when speaking of the duties of *superiors*, he took special care not to separate the sacramental and the agogical role. Listen to the advice he gives to the participants of the retreat in 1847: “Another thing, Messieurs: if the Society is to prosper and its houses be houses of saints, the superior must understand the position he occupies. He must remember that he is the representative of Jesus Christ, and that he is entrusted with his little flock in a very special way. Let everything else give way before the duties of his office. The superior is not responsible just for keeping order but for seeing that each of the members of his community grows in virtue, and for helping them to reach their goal of perfection. The superior is one who guides, who comforts, who urges on. I stress that more than ever.”⁶ Therefore the superior, as representative of Christ, is called to guide, console, stimulate and see to

⁵ *Constitutions* 1873, no. 432.

⁶ *A Founder Speaks*, doc. 142, 21.

the personal growth of each religious. This means that he is, first of all, to exercise his agogical role. This connection between the agogical and the sacramental role, fundamental though it may be, is not, however, without ambiguity. True, the superior is the representative of the Good Shepherd, but the glory of his supernatural status can lead to very earthly manipulations.

7. Colin and the majority of Founders of Congregations link not only the agogical and sacramental role of superiors but they also combine the roles of spiritual director and the hierarchical role. The majority of founders, Colin included, had no objection to imposing, by rule, spiritual direction by the superior. Listen to him again in this same passage of *A Founder Speaks*: “Each superior must see his subjects at least once a month to sound out where they stand spiritually.”⁷ This is a directive, which today, perhaps, would make us raise our eyebrows, but, which was the application of a practice used by the majority of religious congregations since the time of St. Ignatius.⁸ Colin consecrates an entire article to it in the Common Rules.⁹ He says: “It is extremely important that they be perfectly known to the superior as regards both the inner and the outer man.”¹⁰ That is why Colin encourages the Marists to open their hearts to their major superiors from time to time and to report to their immediate superiors at least once a month.¹¹ In the eyes of Colin, opening the heart provided the ideal opportunity for the superior to exercise his spiritual leadership, and at the same time gave the subject a guarantee for advancement in the road of sanctity.¹² The link between the role of the superior as spiritual guide and his role as hierarchical superior is so close in Colin’s mind that, when speaking of spiritual

⁷ *A Founder Speaks*, doc. 142, 21.

⁸ The *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, t. XI, p. 1070, defines opening up to the superior as follows: “The ascetical practice by which a subject discloses regularly to his superior, according to the rules of the Constitutions, all that touches his personal life: character, aspirations, calls, accomplished efforts, but also the negative side of his life, physical or mental hidden illness, temptations, habitual moral weaknesses, provocative circumstances etc. It means that one makes oneself known as far as possible to the person who is in charge of organising the life of the group....”

⁹ *Constitutions* 1873, no. 207-211.

¹⁰ *Constitutions* 1873, no. 207.

¹¹ *Constitutions* 1872, n.107.

¹² *A Founder Speaks*, doc. 44, 1: The opening of the conscience is “the safest way of not losing one’s way and of preserving peace.”

direction, he seems not to think of the spiritual director, in our sense of the word, but of the superior. I mention this preoccupation of Colin here for two reasons. On the one hand because when speaking of ‘spiritual leadership’ the directives and the example of our founder cannot leave us indifferent. On the other hand because this idea of opening one’s heart to the superior can help us clarify the concept of the superior’s spiritual leadership.

8. It is not difficult to imagine the problems that could arise from this double combining of different types of leadership – the agogic type (the superior as spiritual guide) combined with the sacramental type (the superior as representative of Christ) and the agogic type combined with the juridical type (the superior as legal authority). It led to abuse in practice, given that superiors do not all possess the charisms of prudence and discretion to the same degree. This is a problem of all times. The combination of different roles has above all engendered objections of principle, which touch a rather modern sensitivity. These objections deal with the rights of the person, the inviolability of a person’s conscience, and the connection between exercising authority in the internal and the external forum. How could one avoid using confidential communication at an administrative level? That is why Rome, in 1890, repealed in all the constitutions of non-clerical religious congregations, stipulations calling for an account of conscience to be given to the superior.¹³ The regulations of this decree were taken up again, and extended to all religious, in the Code of 1917. Consequently after 1917, our Society changed its constitutions: opening up to the superior was reduced to external conduct. It should be free and spontaneous. So, it was forbidden from then on for superiors to question confreres on matters concerning internal forum.

9. The redaction committee of our present Constitutions put the question as to how it could take into account what Colin was looking for in his article on the opening of conscience to superiors and, at the same time, observe the restrictions imposed by canon law. It is with this intention that the 4th section of the 2nd article of the 3rd chapter of the present Constitutions (numbers 139-141) was written.¹⁴ However, the

¹³ Decree *Quemadmodum* (17 December 1890).

¹⁴ Gaston Lessard, *Study-Aids for the 1988 Constitutions of the Society of Mary, Chapter III*, Rome 1990, p. 30-33.

text, as it was adopted by the Society, shows that in the end, neither those who drafted the text nor the capitulants of the 1985 Chapter wished to consider spiritual direction as being the role of the superior. The title of the section says it all. The section wasn't entitled "Talking with those in responsibility" as the first edition had anticipated, but "Mutual Help". This emphasises the horizontal dimension of the support and counselling between members within the community. Only number 140 touches slightly on the theme of personal direction to be given by the superior, where it says that the Marist "can expect from those in authority, especially from his local superior, friendly guidance concerning his life and work."

10. Our congregation, it seems to me, in its constitutions, did not wish to continue the tradition of opening one's heart to the superior, even in the mitigated form conceded by canon law. Mainly, without doubt, for fear of confusing internal and external forum, that is, for fear that confidential secrets might be used at the administrative level. Actually, experience has shown that the superior should always be careful not to allow himself to get entangled in a confidential relationship which paralyses his administrative freedom of action. Many superiors, who recently had to deal with questions of sexual abuse, have learnt this at their cost. It is not without reason that one of the most accredited commentaries on the 1983 Code thinks that the Code would have done better not to allow at all the possibility of opening one's conscience, even though it be free and spontaneous.¹⁵ The spiritual direction, which our constitutions speak about on two occasions,¹⁶ is therefore quite different from spiritual leadership. The spiritual director is chosen freely. His relationship with the person directed lasts until either the religious or the director terminates it. The religious gives him access to the internal forum. On the other hand, the superior is appointed by the congregation. He is appointed for a definite period and he concentrates on the external forum. He has the right, and sometimes even the duty, to address personal questions, of course, but the area of his questioning has to be well specified. He will see how the person's external behaviour fits in with the spiritual, community and missionary values of the congregation. It is true, more than ever to-day, that the superior needs a spirit of discretion and charity. He must always have

¹⁵ *Münsterischer Kommentar zum Codex Iuris Canonici*, C. 630, par. 5.

¹⁶ *Constitutions*, no. 100 and 123.

respect for consciences. But he keeps the right to watch and question. Lifestyles, spending, vacations, travel, prayer, friendships, periods of renewal, are not simply private affairs which only slightly concern, or don't concern at all, the community and the mission.

11. It is in this sense that our present Constitutions, in the chapter on government, raise the agogical dimension of the superior's profile. His spiritual leadership extends to the community and to its works as well as to the person. As for the superior general, our Constitutions speak of his 'responsibility', 'concern', 'care', 'wisdom', 'communion of faith and charity',¹⁷ 'unifying and animating', 'deep faith', 'wide experience', 'clear discernment', 'capacity for communication and collaboration'.¹⁸ With regard to the provincial, our constitutions state clearly that he must "promote the religious and spiritual life of all the members of the province" and "strengthen the bonds of unity within the province and the whole Society".¹⁹ Then the local superior must "ensure that his community is truly Marist in character". "He has a duty of uniting and guiding the community, fostering the personal growth of its members and promoting the apostolic works in which they are engaged".²⁰ In addition, in the two sections which deal with obedience, our present Constitutions show that, concerning obedience, the local superior cannot be satisfied just by giving instructions, but he has a particular role in leading and animating the process of discerning the best ways of being obedient to the Lord.²¹

12. By insisting on spiritual leadership, I do not wish to suggest that, in addition to his administrative tasks, a superior should also consecrate time to things spiritual. I am not saying either, that the best spiritual leader is the one who opens and closes each meeting with a prayer. The leadership of which I am speaking, consists largely in the pursuit of spiritual ends with administrative instruments.²² These administrative tools are varied: working on personal persuasion or dissuasion, having personal conversations, setting up community meetings, preparing agendas for the meetings, planning and evaluating

¹⁷ *Constitutions*, n. 180.

¹⁸ *Contitutions*, n. 182.

¹⁹ *Constitutions*, n. 206.

²⁰ *Constitutions*, n. 213.

²¹ *Constitutions*, n. 105.

²² *With a more lively confidence*, Rome, 2005, 38.

ministries, visiting, supervising rules, caring for initial and ongoing formation, etc.

13. Contrary to what certain people believe, the task of a superior has become more demanding, not easier, as esteem for individual responsibilities increases. Being a superior in a culture centred on the individual is more demanding than in a culture where the group would prevail over the individual. Each superior should learn how to walk a tightrope in order to find the balance between the tender care for the needs of the individual and the pursuit of the ends of the institute. That is why the formation of superiors at the local level is a priority to-day, as seen by the 2005 Council of the Society.²³ The 2009 General Chapter has taken up this concern again: “By 2011, in dialogue with the general administration, provinces/districts will introduce training for local superiors as spiritual leaders of local communities.”²⁴ In John Hannan’s first circular letter, this decision of the general chapter was not mentioned, which is quite understandable, seeing that the chapter was addressing, primarily, the districts and the provinces. One can’t do everything at once. So, I am very happy that the region of France has taken on the task. Concern for the local communities, the smallest cells of the organism of our Society, is all the more important as the Society is beginning to develop global and international structures.

²³ Council of the Society 2005, Mexico, 3.3.

²⁴ General Chapter 2009, SD 25.